all your stars

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all your stars

by lordmarvoloriddle

Summary

> “I will fix this, fix you. Fix your mind, make you happy, kiss you all day long, whatever you wish. I will do it, me. No one else but me.”
>
> The rendezvous at The Department of Mysteries spirals into a series of events which change the future of the wizarding world. As always, Harry is right at the middle of it all, yet in a situation he couldn’t have ever fathomed and alongside the very person whom he was supposed to hate. It changes them both.

Notes

> beta by the amazing Vanillaghost

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

Harry stood there, peering at the spot where Sirius was *supposed* to be. For a moment he could not comprehend how this was even possible. He *had* to be there, Harry's vision showed him he would be. Only he wasn't.

In heavy silence Harry faced his friends. They seemed to be waiting for him to say something but he found himself unable to do so. Hermione had been right, and now Harry felt like a fool for not listening to her in the first place, for leading all of them here without any proof other than his vision. Voldemort's vision. Their vision.

"Umm, Harry?" Ron dared, breaking the uncomfortable hush unfolding in the unlit hallway.

"What?" he snapped at the redhead.

It came out ruder than Harry intended. He almost apologised.

"Y — your name ..." His best friend pointed to one of the many small glass spheres placed on the shelf next to Harry. "Your name, it's written on *that* ."

Harry moved his gaze from Ron to the glowing sphere. He closed his eyes for a second yet his name was still there when he opened them. On its label was scribbled a date from sixteen years ago and below that he read:

S.P.T. to A.P.W.B.D.

Dark Lord

and (?) Harry Potter

Without thinking he stretched out his hand, fingers coming to a halt a few centimetres away from the blue sphere, reluctant to touch the small globe.

"Don't!"

Hermione's voice startled him.

"We don't know what could happen once you touch it," she reasoned in a grave voice, catching his eye before nervously looking around. "Let's just leave. I have a bad feeling about this."

Harry frowned, his hand still raised. "But it concerns me," he argued. "One way or another. Why else would it have my name written there?"

Neville's gaze moved between him and the bushy-haired girl as if watching a muggle tennis match, not yet sure who was going to be crowned winner. "H-Harry, I think she's right…" He appeared ready to faint any second now, his whole body trembling.

"No," Harry found himself protesting, and moved to grab the sphere. But his fingers were prevented from touching it, meeting the flat surface of something hard and *solid* . Only there was nothing. Just air. Shoving his palm against it was like trying to move a mountain with his bare hands. Absolutely nothing happened.

The others shifted behind him, trying to understand why he wouldn't take the glowing orb already.

"Hermione, I—"

Then a far too well-known voice called out his name, breaking the last piece of Harry's remaining calm.

"I must confess, *Harry* , I was not expecting this."

Harry spun around and heard everyone hold their breath as they saw the Death Eaters in front of them, behind them, surrounding them. Everywhere. But something was amiss. The voice belonged to Voldemort, he was convinced. Yet Harry couldn't catch sight of him in the group of masked faces right before his eyes. Lucius Malfoy's shiny hair made him easy to spot, like a flame in the darkness. But the others remained a mystery.

There was only one person without a mask, he noticed now; coming from behind the gathered Death Eaters with slow, relaxed steps. A man Harry recognised at once even if he wasn't as young as the boy who came out of the diary.

Voldemort, or rather an older horrifying version of Tom Riddle, was staring right back at him, twirling his yew wand between long spidery fingers and strolling through the throng of his followers as if on a leisurely walk. A dangerous smirk danced on his lips as he regarded the small group of teenagers. Like a cat setting its sights on a mouse.

Harry had not a single clue what to do. It was the graveyard all over again, only this time he wasn't alone. His friends were here with him, their lives in as much danger as his own. Maybe more. And he wasn't confident he could safely get them out of this unscathed, or in any other condition. All because of his dream. Because of Harry.

"I believe both of us had our fair share of surprises this evening, wouldn't you agree?"

Ginny gasped from behind, undoubtedly recognising Voldemort now despite his twisted features, a puzzling yet enchanting combination between the snake-like monster and the handsome Tom Riddle from long before they were even born. The sight was horrifying. The man had eyes only for Harry, as if the others weren't worthy of his attention. He didn't know if he should be relieved by this fact or not. Harry clutched his wand tighter. "Sirius isn't here," he said, yet it sounded more like a question even to his own ears.

“No, he is not,” Voldemort confirmed, stopping in front of his minions. “You only saw what Lord Voldemort wanted you to see. Nothing more and nothing less.”

The Death Eaters gathered closer, making Harry and his friends close ranks.

“You wanted me here,” Harry concluded, keeping his eyes only on the Dark Lord and taking in every move he made. Or did not make. “But why? To kill me?”

Voldemort’s lips stretched into a grin as he inched forward with each passing second, a walking and talking nightmare ready to strike.

And Harry was dead terrified.

“ *Not quite* ,” chided Voldemort, this time in Parseltongue. “ *But I suppose it will have to come to that as well. No, my dear Harry, the reason for your presence here is right behind you. The very object you had previously tried to take for yourself and, to my immense surprise, were unable to.”*

“ *Why do you need a prophecy you already know? Why do you need me to pick it up for you? It looks like you and your minions have no problem walking into the Ministry whenever you want.* ”

Something gleamed in Voldemort’s eyes but it was immediately replaced by his usual cold stare.

“ *I needed the Chosen One to take the prophecy concerning himself and the Dark Lord. Only the Chosen One — namely* ***you*** *— could have picked it up. So, imagine my surprise when your tiny hand wasn’t allowed to pass through the enchanted wall.* ”

Understanding crashed over Harry all at once like a cold shower, his mind putting together the pieces of what Voldemort confessed for his ears only. Fear was immediately replaced by confusion. “ *But I am the Chosen One* ,” he argued, mimicking a stubborn child. His friends fidgeted around him, unnerved by the two of them speaking in the unknown language.

“ *The last few minutes has proven otherwise.* ”

“ *But how?* ” Harry asked, conscious of the fact he was having a rather civil conversation with the Dark Lord. And he hadn’t tried to kill Harry just yet.

The now black-haired man tilted his head in a manner so human that Harry could only stare. Both the Death Eaters and his friends were expressing signs of impatience yet still waited in silence for him and Voldemort to finish talking, the only alternative being death.

“ *A mistake, an error of communication… Call it whatever you desire,* ” Voldemort explained. “ *And from my part, no less. But this ends now. Tonight.* ”

Harry discerned Voldemort’s mood rather easily despite the fact that his anger was far more contained than how it had been in the cemetery. The eyes were what gave him away.

Harry knew he should think of a plan to escape. However, his mind buzzed with unanswered questions; the same questions Voldemort himself harboured apparently. Wasn't he the Chosen One? It didn't make any sense. And the monster still hadn't attacked him.

Harry's heart was beating like crazy, so loud Voldemort himself must have heard it.

Hermione's hand touched his the same moment the fight broke: Only three beats later. Suddenly spells were flying all around, in front of them and behind. Harry turned, eyes widening at seeing Sirius, Remus and a good part of The Order all clearing a path at their backs, attacking the taken-aback Death Eaters.

"Go!" His godfather screamed and he was dragged off by Hermione.

Voldemort was nowhere in sight and that alone made Harry's blood freeze. The Dark Lord was many things but a coward was not one of them. Where was he as his followers fought?

Harry caught sight of Bellatrix making her way toward Sirius and only his godfather's words made him keep running behind the rest of his friends. Luna's light coloured hair danced in his vision as they sprinted through the lengthy corridor toward the Minister's atrium. They needed to leave this place. If The Order was here it could only mean others will soon arrive as well. Everything was going to be fine. Harry periodically looked behind his shoulder but there was no one following. Only the sound of their hurried footsteps echoed in the dead silence from the hall.

As soon as the line of green fireplaces came into sight, Ron let out a loud laugh and none of them slowed down for even a second. The entire place was deserted. Ginny and Luna got there first, staring back at Harry for instructions.

"Go! We'll be right behind!"

The girls disappeared a moment later into the flames, quickly followed by Neville and Ron. Hermione's hand found his as she stepped into the fireplace. Then Harry felt the familiar hook in the back of his navel when someone seized his free hand and his head split in half. It went downhill from there. His grip on Hermione loosened, their hands separating in an instant. There was a blinding light and then Harry's body hit the ground. The pain had vanished.

* * *

Even before he inhaled, Harry's nostrils filled with the salty smell that could only belong to the sea. Waves could be heard crashing against the shore somewhere very close to him… like they were… directly below?

Thankfully, his wand was still in his hand. He would have tried to Apparate, but surely Voldemort had been smarter than that? There would be wards surrounding him by now.

When he opened his eyes, Harry wasn't in the least bit surprised to see Voldemort there, mere steps away. White wand pointed downward, imposing body motionless. As if waiting for

Harry to say or do something first. The wind blew black curls in his eyes yet Voldemort seemed unbothered.

Pushing himself to his feet, Harry rose from where he laid on the wet grass. If he were going to die on this island in the middle of nowhere, he was going to die fighting, not quivering on the ground like a weakling even if his insides were clenched in fear. He hoped his friends were safe at least, wherever they were.

Voldemort's wand still did not raise. If that was a good sign or not, Harry could only guess.

"What now?" Harry asked, raising his voice a little in order to be heard over the crashing sound of the waves. "Are you going to try and kill me? Again? Throw my body into the sea? Throw a feast for the fish?"

Voldemort's grey gaze flickered to his forehead then to his eyes, as if he were able to see right through the empty bravado. He strode forward as if he owned the place yet Harry did not move back an inch. Just to defy him. To show him he could.

"Don't be so cocky, child," Voldemort warned. "You wouldn't be the first to die in here."

He spoke in english this time. There was no need to keep the privacy of their conversation anymore. They were all alone. Harry gulped. Nobody knew of this place, not even Harry himself.

"But do not worry, Harry Potter," Voldemort kept on speaking, stopping dangerously close from where Harry stood trembling despite his previously strong resolve. "I'm not going to kill you this instant. That would leave a great deal of questions unanswered and I'm not making the same mistake twice."

Harry couldn't help it. He laughed without a single trace of humour in his voice, the adrenaline making it hard to control himself and this bizarre urge.

Voldemort stared down at him with something akin to disgust but not quite. More like he was seriously doubting Harry's mental sanity. Which was rich coming from someone like him.

"And I'm supposed to believe you? Just like that?"

The corner of Voldemort's mouth twitched. "You're alive now, aren't you, Potter? If I wanted you dead you would have been the moment you weren't able to take hold of the prophecy. Now cease your foolish trembling before I change my mind. I wouldn't want to go tumbling off this cliff if I were you. The water is rather cold, or so I've heard."

His words were full of sarcasm and unconfined malice, and if someone had told Harry he was going to spend his evening this way he would have laughed once again. The entire situation was more than peculiar. Voldemort didn't have the right to be anything other than a monster, both in appearance and words. So why did he act so very human as they spoke?

Harry stole a quick look behind, only now noticing they were rather close to the edge of the cliff. Something like a cave came into view ahead of them. The sky had darkened, the air was

chilly, and it made no sense why they were here of all places. It certainly wasn't his idea. Harry hadn't been able to think of anything back at the Ministry when the Dark Lord had touched him. Which meant Voldemort had brought them here. Was this place even in Britain? Harry would have asked, but he wasn't sure the older man would tell him the truth. Or provide an answer at all.

"Fine," Harry breathed out. "For the sake of this conversation let's say I believe you. Why else would you have kidnapped me if not to take my life?"

One of Voldemort's perfect eyebrows rose at his words. "I wouldn't call it a kidnapping, more like a forced meeting of sorts. Details are quite important." He took a small pause as if to see whether Harry was going to argue or not. *To humour him* . "I took you to this place to talk, without being interrupted by mindless fools. The two of us needed to do that for a while, and in light of recent events it cannot wait anymore."

Harry looked at him, still waiting for Voldemort to throw an 'Avada Kedavra' at any second. The man did no do such thing, and Harry was beginning to think he really meant what he said. Maybe the Dark Lord did desire only to chat? And maybe he was going crazy now.

"Talk then."

Harry wanted to ask what was going to happen to him after 'the talking part', when this was going to be over. But Harry found himself unable to speak the words. Some part of him still couldn't grasp this was actually happening. He was really here — wherever 'here' was — with Voldemort alongside him, of all things, demanding a conversation. Harry could only imagine Dumbledore's face. Would the old man even believe him? Would anyone? That the monster and the boy were conversing with one another by the sea?

"I was almost as staggered as you were when I discovered you weren't the Chosen One. Because you know what this means?"

The sudden question may have been rhetorical but Harry answered it anyway. "It means you gave me this scar for nothing. It means my parents died for nothing." All these years he had lived with the Dursleys, for absolutely nothing. "You destroyed my life for nothing."

"Yet you still survived my Killing Curse," Voldemort argued, gaze travelling to Harry's scar once again with something akin to pleasure, excitement even. As if his mark on Harry's body was the most wonderful thing in the entire world. "You're The Boy Who Lived. *My* Boy Who Lived, not the Chosen One."

"I'm not anybody — "

His head split in half. Not by pain this time, but by images. Vivid, solid images. Of himself; his limbs being severed from his own body, so real that Harry screamed both in his head and in reality. Blood decorated his hands and clothes, chunks of meat hanging from his white-as-snow bones and there stood Voldemort over him, monumental and formidable in his wickedness and then —

Harry floated in water cold as ice, his breath coming out in white puffs and painting the blackness closing around him. Something even colder touched his bare feet from under the water but Harry was not startled. Three gulps of water later strong hands settled on his bare hips and there stood Tom Marvolo Riddle, drops of water staining his perfect face, sliding across his lower lip like tears. A smile, a touch, and that was all.

Voldemort was still looming over him when Harry came crashing down to reality, stumbling a few steps back and almost falling on his ass.

“ *You are mine, Harry Potter* ,” that menace of a man hissed. “Every insignificant part of you belongs to me and me only. Your mind, your body, your everything. Next time you forget this, I won’t be as merciful as today. No more pretty pictures to stare at.”

Harry was gasping for breath, his wand useless in his hand. There was no defence against Voldemort, not when he wasn’t able to trust even his own mind. “I don’t understand what you want from me,” he lashed out in a desperate attempt to regain some dignity. “I don’t know anything and… nothing makes sense! Enter my mind, see it for yourself! I know nothing!” He was yelling now, despite himself, refusing to even acknowledge the previous invasion of his mind.

Meanwhile Voldemort was the personification of composure, a strange intensity in his gaze. “Have you ever wondered why we can so easily slip into each-other's minds?” the man calmly inquired. “ *You,* who has proven unable to even skim the surface of an average wizard’s thoughts? Slip into the conscience of Lord Voldemort himself?” There was repugnance pouring from his tone and his spidery fingers grabbed hold of Harry’s chin, leading him closer. *Touching him.* Voldemort was touching him. And Harry wasn’t screeching his lungs out from the terror of it. Talk about development. “Tell me, did you ever wonder about this small and crucial fact?” The silence from Harry’s part seemed to both disappoint and please. “Of course you did not,” Voldemort answered his own question. “Let me educate you then. Both on why that is and why you belong to me. Child, you carry a little piece of me deep inside of you…” he whispered in Harry’s face, his eyes gleaming like the cloud-filled sky. “My soul, you are a keeper of my soul. In scientific terms you are what one calls a horcrux.”

Harry’s words died in his throat, the yew wand falling away from his icy fingers. Instead of horror and disgust, numbness spread through every inch of his body. Voldemort drank in every second of expression, still not letting him go. In a strange way, Harry was glad. If not for the older man’s touch, he would have fallen. The weakness in his knees was proof enough.

It hurt because it could be nothing but the truth. Voldemort had never lied to him.

As if someone had suddenly turned the lights on, it brought everything previously hidden into plain sight. So many unanswered questions now answered. *He shared Lord Voldemort’s soul* . It surpassed any other form of intimacy. What was touch when a part of Harry’s very being was a personification of the Dark Lord? Of course he could talk with snakes — Voldemort himself did! Of course Voldemort hadn’t succeeded in killing Harry. After all, it would be like killing himself and —

Did Dumbledore know? This was Harry's first question, and he attempted to remember — to put together numerous conversations and half-answers from the headmaster in the span of so many years…

"I do not know."

Harry raised his gaze to meet Voldemort's own when the man seemed to pluck the question directly from Harry's mind. Like one would from a page in an open book. When the fingers left his chin, Harry's face felt strangely bereft. Lacking. He stumbled back, though he fortunately managed to maintain his balance. The sharp wind of the sea stung him, not unlike the blow his traitorous body experienced by missing the warmth of Voldemort's touch. Or was it because of the man's soul that it ached? Possibly his own? *Horcrux, horcrux, horcrux* . So intricate yet so simple. How it had come to this, Harry had no idea, but he shared Voldemort's soul. They were… they were *soulmates,* as muggles would call it. The newly found knowledge brought some amusement though Voldemort's expression remained the same; cold and uncaring. As if Harry's existence was irrelevant to him — which was a lie. If this were the case, their lovely conversation would not be taking place at all.

"If you jump into the water I'll save you," Voldemort announced, his voice clear above any other sound.

"Are you scared?"

Brows furrowed at him and — *oh* . Voldemort *was* scared. Harry saw his fingers clench around the white wand. He took two, then three, steps closer to Harry and towered over him. Striking.

"I'll save you and then remove your limbs one by one before placing you back together. We can repeat the process time and again, if you will. And then you will learn."

Voldemort was scared, yet so was Harry. Two frightened beings playing at pretend, both aware of what the other felt. So they threatened and listened behind the actual words cruelly thrown around.

Harry learned rather quickly though. No lessons needed. "You could lock me up," he stammered, heart pulsing with the close proximity of the Dark Lord. "So why don't you? What are we here for?"

Having a face like that must be punishment for Harry. How Voldemort pierced him with cold eyes and, aside from fear, Harry's mind could not help but concentrate on how handsome Voldemort was. And damned be all… Voldemort knew. His lips tightened ever so slightly that Harry almost missed it. But there it was. And Voldemort still stood so close, a predator hypnotising its prey. Yet Harry was already in his clutches. The hunt was over and he lived. Which meant there was a higher purpose to all of this.

"Our soul is shattered, Harry," Voldemort finally spoke, voice full of secrets and the wonder of sharing them. "You are a part of me. Being on the same side is a necessity in order to survive." The Dark Lord cut Harry off when he made to open his mouth. "Denying your will

to live is futile, and far too late. Otherwise you would have leaped off this cliff as soon as the chance presented itself. With or without my honest promise."

The breaths they shared felt like they were conspiring. Harry dared not to look away from Voldemort who waited in silence. Waited and waited and did not retreat an inch. Did he not notice what his presence did to Harry? Did he not care?

"What is it you want from me?"

Voldemort's expression shifted. Still cold, but now more pleased. Like a teacher whose favourite student had given him another correct answer. The corners of his cruel mouth lifted up at the same time his left hand did. Fingers traced over Harry's scar and Harry sighed, a needy sound bubbling up from the back of his throat. Wasn't it supposed to hurt? So why did it feel so good? Better than anything else, electrifying enough to make Harry forget himself. Accompanying it was Voldemort's triumphant smirk, as if discovering something precious, as if he'd won.

"What I want?" Voldemort echoed, tasting Harry's words with his tongue. "I want you to be my eyes, my ears, my hands in Hogwarts. I want you to be *me* as you already are. Help me take our soul back."

"I could say no," Harry let out on a shaking breath, shivering with every touch against his scar.

"You could, but the choice is not to be made now."

Voldemort abruptly stood back and Harry ached. They regarded one another while Harry watched him twirl the ashen wand. His pulse raced but not out of fear for his life. Not anymore. It was fear of the unknown, of being left in the dark with Voldemort. A Voldemort who now desired so much more from him. Something Harry may or may not want himself.

"You said you expect me to help us, but I'm not — "

The wand directed itself at Harry's chest this time, its tip bright.

"Far too early… Dumbledore must be losing his mind searching for his pawn. Rest assured, my soul. We'll meet again. And do not fret about your unguarded mind for now. Lord Voldemort takes good care of the things which belong to him."

The spell did not hurt as much as the landing. The smell of the sea was gone and when Harry scrambled to his feet, the tall gates of Hogwarts stood before him. The castle loomed above and Harry remained frozen to the spot for a while, thinking, going over the past minutes over and over again. But he still did not reach any conclusion by the time Filch came into sight.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

beta by the amazing Vanillaghost

Of all things, Harry had forgotten to buy banana ice-cream for Aunt Petunia. He had been sent to the specific supermarket five streets away from Privet Drive especially to get it. *Not* for the strawberry one currently in his bag. Uncle Vernon had made their demands quite clear an hour or so ago when he had narrowed his eyes at Harry and gave him the necessary money alongside a thirteen-item-long shopping list.

It was only two weeks into summer vacation and Harry was slowly losing his mind. Upon his return to Hogwarts, Dumbledore had done nothing but keep his distance just as before. Of course Harry was questioned about his brief disappearance, but the exchange was devoid of any warmth. It reminded him of the few visits to the muggle hospital when he was little and extremely sick. It was true that Dumbledore now evoked uneasiness in him but… *why did Harry still keep silent?* Why not tell the truth about his meeting with Voldemort? He merely gazed at the greyed headmaster and said ‘ *No, I simply separated from Hermione. Nothing happened at the Ministry* ’. Technically, it wasn’t a lie. The change occurred on that cliff, not in the dark halls of the Ministry.

The bigger lie was another thing altogether. Would Dumbledore still care about him if he knew Voldemort’s soul was one with Harry’s own? What would the headmaster do? Maybe nothing. Maybe he would place a wrinkled hand on Harry’s shoulder and offer comfort. *Love* . Like that time in his second year with Riddle’s diary perched on top of Dumbledore’s desk. When something inside Harry had recognised the living memory as being something greater than just that: A memory.

‘It is our choices that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.’

Those were the words he had been told when Harry pointed out the uncanny similarities between himself and Voldemort. Dumbledore must have been right in his belief, Harry reasoned as he lied straight to his face. Because a choice *was* made. And Harry chose to trust in the monster who cherished his life more than anyone else ever would. Dumbledore’s love may not be unconditional but Voldemort’s lust for immortality certainly was.

So Harry painted a blank picture of happiness in the headmaster’s office, sitting across from him. If he expected a change after the encounter, there was none. Harry had been sent back to the Dursleys while Sirius and the rest of his friends were at Grimmauld Place. Just like last year.

And here was Harry, grocery shopping, thoughts and dreams occupied by a fairytale monster who may also be his saviour.

The streets were dark when he returned, two full plastic shopping bags hanging from his hands, placing one leg in front of another, not hurrying when the road was far merrier than the destination. Children's laughter met Harry's ears where the park was crowded with them, running one after another, giggling, pulling at each other's clothes and hair. Harry spared them a curious glance before he crossed the deserted road.

From the only unoccupied bench sat none other than his wicked friend in need, his grey eyes on Harry. He seemed so out of place in the muggle neighbourhood… Far too elegant and imposing to be part of Harry's bland world. Too handsome. And Harry was still too dumb to be thinking about that. What he should be thinking about is how Voldemort knew where to find him. Instead the man rose one eyebrow and Harry sighed before joining the Dark Lord on the bench without a second thought. The groceries were placed down beside him.

"Ice-cream?"

His foolish attempt at humour proved not so amusing judging by Voldemort's expression. Until —

"We could share one," Voldemort offered.

Harry studied the other man who was already returning the favour. Well… if this was a challenge…

The cone was passed from one to the other and the sight of Voldemort eating ice-cream painted an absorbing picture. Harry did not know how the man did it, but no rosy cream tainted his lips or the corners of his mouth. Unlike himself. Harry deduced that sorcery must be involved.

"Did you change your mind about killing me?"

"I do not enjoy repeating myself, Harry. Least of all to my very soul."

Here we go again.

"So what is it? Came here to check on my response? Monitoring? Orders?"

"An invitation."

They may as well be two… *acquaintances* holding an untroubled conversation as dawn settled over the heated city. Voldemort gazed at the last piece of the ice-cream cone before presenting it to Harry. He was scrutinised while swallowing it — which was nothing new if you really considered their past. Whenever they faced each other Voldemort was always focused on him. Harry gracefully returned the favour.

"Come spend the rest of the summer with me," the older man spoke after Harry wiped at the corners of his mouth with the back of his hand. Voldemort grimaced. "You shall be

protected… Offered answers and properly taught where you're lacking. And a few other things."

"You really want us to spend the rest of our lives together."

It was meant as teasing but Voldemort's grey eyes were intense and focused on Harry's face. A faint wind blew, disturbing the perfect curls that fell over his forehead. Harry averted his eyes, blinking. Going with Voldemort. It was madness, no matter the business with the horcrux. So many things could go wrong! And even if nothing did… This was Voldemort, the Dark Lord himself. What were they suppose to do together all day long? Go walking on the beach? Grocery shopping? Killing muggles?

And could it be worse than the Dursleys?

"Right now?" he tried.

"Do you have any other appointments I'm not aware of?" Voldemort retorted as he stood.

"Dumbledore will look for me," Harry reasoned as he followed the Dark Lord down the road, taking care not to forget his shopping bags. "He'll think you had me kidnapped or who kn — "

"We'll manage as long as you're willing, and even then… Do not fret and leave the specifics to me."

Their stroll was nice despite what awaited Harry at the end of it. Fuck, walking with Voldemort was *nice*... All of a sudden the prospect of the beach did not sound so unbelievable anymore. He wondered how they appeared to other passersby. Voldemort with his superior height and handsome face alongside a teen clad in shorts. And Harry thought flying cars were the most peculiar thing that could happen in the wizarding world. Roaming around in Voldemort's company had not been on the list of options at the time.

"I think it'll be for the best if you waited here," Harry informed his companion as they stood in front of the house on Privet Drive, number four. "Explaining to the Dursleys I'm leaving for the rest of the summer could go in a great number of directions…"

"Very well. Do not bother packing."

He took that into consideration as Vernon screamed his lungs out in the living room upon being informed of Harry's imminent departure, and Harry froze as the tall figure of Voldemort strolled into the familiar setting not soon after. Petunia and Dudley seemed not to know how to react to the man invading their space. In the end Vernon became even redder as he placed himself in front of his wife and son, as if feeling Voldemort for the predator he was. Harry could only watch from the sidelines.

The Dark Lord's presence here seemed surreal, surrounded by warm colours and puffy cushions. Being a witness to Harry's everyday life which, despite knowing better, he was ashamed of. Sharing this bared more of him than his nightmares ever did. All those pictures

on display with Harry's face missing from every single one of them. Voldemort had to be blind not to take notice.

"Wha— W *hat are you doing in my house!* ?"

Voldemort did not murder his uncle. Though Vernon may as well be the only single man left alive after disrespecting the Dark Lord straight to his face.

"Harry wasn't coming. I worried, so here I am." His eyes found Harry and he held a hand out for him. "Come darling, we're leaving."

What the actual fuck?

The Dursleys pretty much had the same reaction yet for all the wrong reasons, as Petunia seemed like she had borrowed some of the bright red blush from her husband's face. Harry hoped his own cheeks had kept their normal colour as he placed his hand in Voldemort's, having the most absurd urge to snicker. "Well," he started in what would be an awkwardly bidden goodbye. "I'll be spending the rest of the summer with my — boyfriend so… I guess I'll see you around next year. Have a nice day."

Silence followed as they left the house behind, aiming for the darkness still hand in hand. For Apparition purposes.

* * *

The food tasted better than it did at Hogwarts.

"Are you not eating?" Harry attempted aiming past the tension at a conversation.

Their first meal together — their very first day together — was lunch, as Harry had slept in until midday.

His new clothes had a pleasant fragrance and were made of the highest quality. Just like the mansion he was brought into now. And some mansion it was! To think he had called the Malfoys vain.

And yet… the adjustment to living in this place had been a smooth process. Harry felt good here, even after just a single night. Welcomed, if he dared to go that far. What came to be his room was large and just as expensive looking as the rest of the house and it left Harry wondering if all wizarding homes were like this. Well… not like *this* this. Voldemort himself lived here; it was bound to be special. Even though at first sight it wasn't the dark lair Harry had expected. Sure, it remained a cold one with its chromatic colour scheme, but the feeling you got from the mansion resembled warmness remarkably well.

"I already did," the Dark Lord responded while watching Harry eat. Somehow he managed not to make it creepy and that ought to be terrifying.

Harry swallowed a mouthful of baked potatoes as Voldemort sipped from his coffee. The legendary monster was certainly alive. First ice cream, now coffee. And what a picture they must be painting. The Boy Who Lived and He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named warming their chairs around a table in the same space, in utter silence, until now.

“Do you regret coming here?”

Beneath Voldemort’s callous question lurked a cruel disregard despite the politeness carefully perched atop it. Yet he tried.

“Not yet,” Harry let out, because lying would be treacherous.

“As long as you play your part like a good boy, it’ll never come to such a development. I never break my word,” Voldemort promised. “Now, tell me, what do you make of this?”

The Daily Prophet from in front of the Dark Lord’s empty plate was handed to him, no fingers brushing.

From the front page, a political scandal stared right back. Then the daily count of missing persons Harry strived not to look at too closely. Speculations about said disappearances followed but, other than that, nothing special. Quidditch Games, the winning team beaming brightly for the camera… Then it settled into place.

“There’s nothing written about my disappearance.”

The paper was abandoned and Voldemort did not demand it back.

“Dumbledore is not stupid to let out such sensitive information. But he’s looking. Desperately so.” The older man’s satisfaction was palpable. “Maybe he knows his boy is not his anymore. Never was, never will be. Nonetheless, we need to keep suspicions low.”

“A letter?” Harry suggested, and the corners of Voldemort’s mouth rose. But smiles weren’t supposed to be that sharp.

“Such a smart boy you are.”

If Voldemort saw his sudden stiffness he did not remark on it. He merely conjured Harry the needed tools; some parchment and ink, and set to watching him work. The gaze felt heavier than that of any of his teachers.

* * *

First the monster, now its chambers. The manor’s library was straight out of a fairy tale. A space Harry spent most of his time in, reading the books Voldemort left out on the mahogany desk by the window.

Their days had settled into a pace of their own now. First it was breakfast together discussing trivial things, avoiding the obvious concerns of killing and world domination. Mostly they talked of safe stories about Harry's life. Occasionally, if the man was in a good mood, there were some about Voldemort's own. Those were the most enthralling ones, even if Hogwarts happened to be the usual subject. And when the room across from the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy was mentioned, Harry's heart skipped a beat. So Tom Riddle had found it as well.

Then Harry was left on his own, to wander around the silent manor exploring the few open doors and sometimes wondering through the unkempt garden that would have made Aunt Petunia weep.

And true to his word, Voldemort invested in Harry's education. Almost viciously so. Reading was mandatory and the specific books were given without asking. Not only were they on dark magic, but *everything* , and went far above Harry's expectations. It seemed magic still continued to be magical. And after dinner, when Voldemort returned from his daily trips, they retreated back into the library and discussed what Harry had read. It was far more than simple quizzing. Voldemort took his time explaining while also waiting for questions from Harry as well. He performed for Harry and in turn demanded the same. The teaching style proved to be surprisingly efficient. For the first time in his life, Harry actually looked forward to lessons.

And it was one of these evenings when Harry finally pushed through his pride and said it.

"You're a very good teacher."

The air changed. From the desk covered by books and papers, Voldemort tilted his head at Harry. "If not for the old man's pride I may have been your actual teacher."

Harry placed his cup of hot chocolate on the low table, sinking back into the couch where green eyes met grey. "Defence Against the Dark Arts," he guessed, and Voldemort offered the closest thing to a smile. "You wanted to teach for real?"

The image of Voldemort as a handsome yet strict teacher assigning homework had both its charm and strangeness. And *oh* — the detentions.

"At least in the beginning," the Dark Lord confessed in a heartbeat. "I am who I am. I may as well have ended up not taking any pleasure from the activity."

"But you teach me," reasoned Harry. "Everyday when you arrive home from wherever it is you go. And you never complain or hold back."

"Indeed, but I have no patience for mediocre students."

The compliment did a funny thing to Harry's insides. No, coming from Voldemort it must be more than a mere compliment. The Dark Lord did not strike him as the type of man to waste his time on pointless flattery, especially on Harry who was already in his clutches. It was the truth then.

“Thank you, but I catch on so quickly because you’re good at making me understand and master it, both the spells and the theory behind it. Better than all my previous teachers. You make it natural.”

A truth to another truth.

“Or perhaps we simply work well together.”

This simple statement revealed too much to be entirely welcome.

“Because of the horcrux?”

“Depends. We will never know.”

Voldemort had left his chair, turning his back on Harry to face the window. So very tall he was. Harry abandoned his attempts at not staring. He was in the same room with Lord Voldemort. What else was one supposed to do?

The darkness outside was complete, not a trace of light coming in from the window. No street lights, no lanterns, nothing. Not even in the distance, away from civilisation. Maybe miles away. Strangely enough, the fact left Harry feeling cold. It mattered not where Voldemort had taken him. Harry may desire something else in the future, but for now this was enough. His time was not wasted, the company was fascinating in spite of the uneasiness. Days were full. Both with learning magic and learning about himself, while Hogwarts was only a distant thought in the future.

* * *

A change was happening. In little more than a month, Harry was already aware of it. His eyes passed too quickly over outrageous affairs as if it didn’t make any difference. Over curses that made death sound like a blessing, news of both wizards and muggles disappearing and never to be found again. Sometimes worse. Over mutilated bodies discovered in one home or another. Other times, less than bodies. Sometimes severed parts; a piece here and another there. His eyes passed too easily over the bloody puzzle pieces that all linked to the menace in front of him, peacefully gazing out the window as if innocent. This new Harry had grown too accustomed to Voldemort, it seemed.

“Where do you go when you leave me alone?” Harry quietly asked, and for a moment he thought he may be ignored. But no such thing happened.

“You already know. This war will not win itself.”

“War. Most people don’t even know there is a war,” Harry said, and a short pause followed filled with a gory future and blood stained streets. “Maybe it doesn’t even need to be one.”

Voldemort’s eyebrows rose, his interest piqued. He stalked a few steps closer to Harry.

“I mean… nobody actually saw you that day when you took me to the cliff,” Harry explained, nervously licking his dry lips. “Bad things are happening but your name is not linked to any of it. Lucius Malfoy and many others are infiltrating the Ministry, serving you. Why not get power the easy way? Why make people despise you more than they already do?”

“Such *dreams* . Fierce dreams you have. But child… as long as Albus Dumbledore lives, the kind of power you’re talking about will not come into my hands the easy way. And in order to kill your headmaster, a war is needed. Otherwise he would have confronted me long ago, just the two of us, in a fair fight he knows I’d win. He refrained from it despite knowing of my return. Left it all on your shoulders to crush you underneath the weight. Wasted all these years cowering in—”

Harry zoned out, stomach cold, with a sudden fear that almost brought him to his knees.

“He may know,” Harry let out breathlessly. “About me being a horcrux… and… I don’t think Dumbledore left it all to me. That isn’t like him. Maybe he made it look like it, but—”

Voldemort became a statue. Harry perceived it for what it was as easily as he breathed: A silent threat not aimed at him. Dread nestled in the pit of Harry’s stomach along with horror.

“He couldn't have known where to find the other horcruxes,” Voldemort said. But neither he nor Harry was convinced.

Horcruxes . How many were out there?

“Are you sure?” Harry pressed.

The blinking of Voldemort’s eyes ceased for a short while before he suddenly Disapparated, leaving Harry staring at the dark window in his place. Waiting.

* * *

Distracting himself remained hopeless as minutes came and went.

Harry had just finished pretending to read his assigned lecture for the following day when Voldemort stormed into the library.

“Hello,” Harry greeted, making himself smaller on the couch.

Voldemort remained on his feet in the middle of the room.

“Hello, Harry.”

The bad mood was obvious and gave Harry his answer. Voldemort’s tone said it all as well as his whole body. The tension in his broad shoulders, the hard lines of his mouth. Utterly

menacing and utterly miserable at the same time. A golden pendant was clutched in his right fist. He swung it onto the table next to the hot chocolate — now cold — as the boy rose, more focused on the older wizard than on the jewellery. Voldemort was focused on him as well.

“Do you feel it?”

The Dark Lord’s question took him by surprise.

“Feel what?”

Something dangerous swirled in Voldemort’s eyes as he slowly stepped closer, one foot in front of the other. “What’s on the damned table, *Harry* ,” he explained, coldness clouding his voice. “Can you feel our soul in the same space as us? In the same way you feel me?”

“There’s just you and me,” Harry responded at the same time it dawned on him. “Did something happen to your horcrux?”

Because what else could it be?

Before he had the chance to open his mouth to demand more knowledge, all the glass inside the room shattered with an ear-piercing sound, window included. Shiny, sharp shards lay scattered across most surfaces, but at last the man before his eyes exhaled peacefully.

Harry waited.

“The thing I retrieved is not my horcrux. It appears exactly like it, waiting in the same place I’d hidden my soul using my own hands, but it’s not it!”

The shouting returned and Harry was left petrified. He had been witness to Voldemort’s rage before, yet this was the first time it wasn’t directed at Harry. What should he say in order to offer comfort?

His heart skipped. *Offer comfort* . Voldemort appeared ready to commit murder and Harry was debating on how to help him? His life had always been full of surprises but never quite like this.

“Dumbledore must have been there, no one else could have reached such a place,” Voldemort raved, eyes wild. “He must have stolen and replaced it… He knows about my soul… which means…”

“But if the others weren’t safe, wouldn’t you know? I mean… you sense me, and I’m the last horcrux you made.”

As if a switch had been flipped, the Dark Lord stilled, his handsome face calculating as he took Harry’s words into consideration. “Given the state I was in after… *our little accident* when I attempted to end your life… the chances of having been aware of their supposed destruction are… not high.” Grey eyes flickered to green. “Come, my horcrux, let us go and fetch you a ring.”

Their hands met.

* * *

How Voldemort's state of serenity came to be was a wonder if anyone knew.

Harry remained behind him, watching his black coat lightly flutter in the breeze coming from the shattered windows. They were in a rundown house on the outskirts of a modest-looking village the man had Apparated them to. The night was quiet and ever since they neared this ruin of a home, Harry knew the ring Voldemort needed was not here. Fear had gripped him, though it must be a small portion of what the Dark Lord himself was experiencing.

Harry dared not approach him. There was nothing he could say or do.

The false horcrux was in Harry's hands, the small chain twisted around his fingers. Silence made everything tense and the way Voldemort just stood there definitely did not help. It was excruciating and defeating, and ten times worse than losing a Quidditch game. If Dumbledore had been smart enough to see past Voldemort's secrets there was nothing stopping him from seeking out more and potentially finding out about Harry himself. Or maybe his headmaster already knew it. But no, Harry had to be safe. He was confident enough Voldemort would be there if needed. Providing the Dark Lord could protect something, his very soul may as well be the only thing that mattered.

"I still have you."

Voldemort faced him, stalking closer, as the moonlight from outside illuminated his sharp features. In the absence of anger, calm had settled in. It scared Harry more than any outburst of magic ever would. One could never guess his next move. Voldemort may strike or he may not. Harry doubted his life was in danger but he shuddered when the Dark Lord invaded his space.

"If the worst is to happen, you are still here, and I'll play the role of knight in shining armour forever if need be. Life goes on. There's no purpose on dwelling on it or staying in this shithole longer than necessary."

In spite of his words, Voldemort did not Apparate them straight away. They walked on the bumpy road leading to the village while Harry debated with himself if he should say something or not. It felt dangerous to do so, but in the end he did.

"You're right. Life does goes on. Even in the past… I sometimes… sometimes I ached with the need of running away from it all. To just turn my back on everything and give up. Pretend it's not my problem and let Dumbledore handle you. But I never did."

The light breeze danced with Voldemort's dark mane. The Dark Lord was not looking at Harry as he spoke.

“Giving up…” He tasted the words with his lips. “I confess there was a time I’ve considered the concept as well. Long ago, before I knew the right name for what I was. But I’m telling you, Harry, giving up is a lie meant to comfort weaklings. No matter what life offers you, no matter how one may think he’s lost it all, there’s always something else to look forward to. I have the experience to prove it. How when every time I’ve thought my life was miserable or broken beyond repair, I ended up finding good in it afterwards, whatever your definition of ‘good’ may entail. This is yet another one of those times.”

Their walk and their conversation came to an end then, and icy air and sharp glass awaited upon return

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

beta by the amazing Vanillaghost

The following three days Harry was alone and lonely.

He reached this conclusion quite early on the first night he had no one to share his newly acquired knowledge with. No one to better explain his assigned readings, no one to demonstrate the theories with a flick of elegant fingers, and no one to converse with. But not just anyone would do. Harry craved *Voldemort's* biting remarks, his seriousness and his coldness. The way he listened to Harry until late at night, and for what felt like eternities at a time. Harry enjoyed listening to him as well.

Only the house elves remained and none were keen to hold a dialogue. Their little bald heads hung low as half-empty plates were collected and if words left their mouths it was only in response to Harry's needs or something similar.

"Is master's guest not content with the food?"

"No, it was very tasty, thank you," Harry excused himself with the help of a smile. "I'm just not hungry."

Saying he was not feeling well would be a grave mistake. One mention about his health and the house elf would descend into a frenzy; fetching potions and the like and generally conducting a great amount of chaos. Harry wasn't actually sick but anxious for the Dark Lord's return.

How many shreds of his soul were out there for Voldemort to take so long in reaching them?

After the fiasco with the ring they had returned to the mansion in awkward silence where Harry had been abandoned the minute they set foot inside the enormous hallway. But he understood. Voldemort would move quicker without him. There would be no questions, no need to watch out for anyone else's safety but his own. But still… why hadn't he come back already? An ocean of uncertainties invaded Harry's mind. What if by some chance Dumbledore had appeared? What if the Dark Lord was wounded? Then Harry realised he was being foolish and Voldemort would have looked at him with amusement for even thinking it. Him, being defeated by Dumbledore.

Unfortunately, Harry's feelings did not seem to be on the same page as his rationality. Another few hours passed. Slow torturous hours that clawed at every uncertainty in his head. Sleep would not help. Sometime during the third morning he retreated into the garden where nothing grew but death. Decay surrounded Harry and if not for the fresh air, he would have

remained inside, hiding beneath the bed covers. But here in the garden nothing happened other than walking and thinking and walking some more. A morbid routine until Voldemort returned.

Harry's entire being felt his presence in that precious moment. He stood on the stairs of the manor to find the other wizard treading steadily in Harry's direction.

In that moment Voldemort was everything. Both beauty and thorns. Both greatness and maliciousness, his black attire emerged from all the wild green of the untamed garden in a brutal juxtaposition. His steps echoed on the pavement.

"My soul," Voldemort acknowledged, eyes blazing.

The horcruxes were sheltered then.

"Welcome, my soul," Harry echoed, only for the satisfaction of watching Voldemort's pupils flare.

"Is this your attempt at flattery?"

Harry shrugged. "I got the idea you were teaching me more than magic. So…" he trailed off, suddenly on unsteady ground. "Are they safe?"

The corners of Voldemort's mouth quirked up as he motioned for Harry to walk with him between the lifeless flowers on the paved path leading behind the manor. Maybe the Dark Lord was as wary of closed spaces as he was.

"Of course. Our soul is invulnerable… All, saving one. They are safer than before. And the last… well… I find myself unable to reach it at the moment."

And yet Voldemort did not sound troubled.

"How come? Where did you hide it?"

Considering the ring should have been at that ruin of a house, Harry couldn't quite picture more sophisticated hiding places for the rest of Voldemort's soul. Maybe in the sea… or a lake. But you could swim in those, and one may yet discover what you had previously hidden.

"Hogwarts," the Dark Lord confessed, and Harry froze.

"What?"

"Room of Requirement, Ravenclaw's diadem — which is not as lost as most people believed it to be. You'll know when you see it. Perhaps before you even do. You could try, for all it's worth. Perched on top of your head, it'll paint quite the picture."

"That's why you need me back at Hogwarts," Harry sighed, ignoring Voldemort's last statement.

“Among other things.”

Their eyes were glued to each other’s faces. Talking about dishonesty would be futile. No one had agreed to these terms. The only promise had been safety and Voldemort had delivered. At the end of the summer it would be Harry’s turn to keep his end of the bargain.

“Were you lonely without me?” Voldemort demanded in a witty tone, his eyes on the house.

“Of course not,” Harry lied.

The man tilted his head in mocking distrust. As if knowing.

* * *

Voldemort will always gaze at Harry. Will always insist on being told about what had happened in his absence, and though Harry would rather die than admit his loneliness, he couldn't exactly make abstraction of it. So he told him about his readings, about his daily walks through the garden, and even praised the nameless house elves for their marvellous cooking and the way they took care of everything while Harry had moped around in the library. But not quite in those same words, naturally.

“There was this author…” Harry began that night during dinner, with animation creeping into his voice. The manor felt different with this wicked man seated across from him. “Can’t exactly remember the name… something like Egorov… doesn’t really matter. From what I gathered, he was a political activist a little more than a century ago. Also quite the believer in how the Dark Arts was simply magic. His writing was unique. The way he described them; no light, no dark, but just magic. He reminded me of you. A bit more polite, to tell the truth, but I guess you can’t exactly talk any way you want in a book… Well… what I’m trying to say is that you have your living example that one can both hold your beliefs and work inside the system to make them a reality. The book was in your library so I suppose you’ve already read it—”

“We’re talking about dreams, my soul. Dreams are nothing but just that: Dreams. And if you had read more closely you would have found Egorov, as you well remembered, to have different perspectives from me.”

“No,” Harry insisted. “I don’t know if he was a pure blood or not, but he still seemed to be an immensely powerful wizard from the way he talked about the world. All he cherished was power — just like you — even if he never explicitly said so, it’s pretty clear he considered all magical blood to be equal. The blood division was trampled over. It was ability, to him, that stood above anything else.”

“Men are not equal.”

Harry made to protest but Voldemort held up a hand.

“Give me the respect of listening before you speak. Now… we’re not concerned with specifics… blood purity, equality emerging from wealth or social status. In the end they’re just parts of a whole. A concept. Think of equality as a concept but the concept itself is a lie. Consider this… is Dumbledore equal to his brother? Are you equal to a house elf? Is Lucius Malfoy equal to me? Or… is a shop worker equal to a lord? The answer is no. And it’s obvious, no matter what society tells us. The opportunities are not the same, nor are the capabilities. I am infinitely more powerful than Lucius could ever be, a lord could buy the shop worker, and Aberforth Dumbledore doesn’t hold a candle to his great brother. Most of us fancy all these people to be equal when the truth is staring us right in the face. So why do we lie to ourselves and preach about egalitarianism? Why do we cherish a lie when we otherwise condemn dishonesty?”

Voldemort waited for an answer as Harry’s mind worked, heart in his throat, while the food on his plate lay forgotten.

“I can’t give you an answer this instant. Maybe never,” Harry admitted. “You’re right but… something like this simply cannot be. If we accept this moral ground devoid of any morality, what stops us from justifying violence? Or oppression, mass-murder, and slavery? Where would be the justice in that?”

“Now we’re going back to the start, Harry. Who dictates what’s fair in a society other than its leaders? Who imposes those values which in time we consider our own?”

Harry was at loss for words. Until — “Again, it is true. But if there’s no moral standard, then everything is permitted.”

Voldemort returned to his food and made an accurate slice to the dry meat. “I’m not saying the moral standard should perish. Nor that it is good or that it is bad. It simply is. I will have one when the times comes. The same wheel spins on, only on different spikes.”

“Am I one of those spikes?”

Grey eyes darkened at Harry’s question. The Dark Lord held his knife so firmly Harry could see the bones in his knuckles bulging.

“You belong to me, my soul,” Voldemort’s refined voice corrected. “We are a gift to each other. Something precious. None of us can truly be alone, not even if we wish for it. Blindly, I found you in the dark. In the cold. How I desired to have you on your knees with wide eyes begging for mercy. To put an end to the legend that sullied my own… Words don’t do it any justice… yet the pages have turned, time has passed. The fantasy must take another shape. And Harry, do not fret. Ever since I laid eyes on you in that crib, you were far too special to compare to the rest of them, both in death and in life. A tiny menace whom my soul deemed fit to claim as its own. A spike, you ask? No, more like part of the hand which spins the wheel.”

Greedy and frightening his words were.

“Why do you sometimes let me forget who you are? Replace the monster with the prince and then shift back into it. Is it for amusement? Does it entertain you?”

“Hardly. You see, fairy tales are misleading in that regard,” Voldemort explained, his handsome face illuminated by the countless candles across the dining room. Slowly, without taking his eyes from Harry’s, he continued. “Whoever told you the monster and the prince are required to be two different beings was a fool. That or the truth behind *Beauty and the Beast* had escaped him or her.”

“I wasn’t told many fairy tales growing up. Sorry.”

It did not escape Harry’s notice that Voldemort had mentioned a muggle story. But instead of mentioning it, he ate and drank and thanked the house elves when it was time to clean the table.

“Philosophy, fairy tales, what else will follow to be discussed?” Harry noted when Voldemort pushed back his chair and towered over the other occupants in the room.

“I’d tell you but then it would ruin the surprise and we cannot have that. Sweet dreams, my soul.”

Harry wasn’t sure he welcomed this surprise. Still, excitement coiled in the pit of his belly and morning could not arrive soon enough. A recurring thought came and went… Was it still betrayal if the one you were betraying was yourself?

* * *

They went out the following morning.

Harry hadn’t been informed on the specific destination. But it was not as if he really minded. It was a surprise, after all. He simply placed his hand in Voldemort’s own and let himself be pulled into darkness. When he blinked, sunlight had disappeared and wetness hit his face. Rain.

“Follow me.”

Voldemort had brought him to a village. A muggle village. The streets were deserted due to the storm so there was no need to hide from curious eyes as they threaded onto the main road, Voldemort leading with his black coat fluttering in the breeze. At some point Harry was ready to question the purpose of the visit when Voldemort came to a stop in front of a house just like any other and knocked twice.

Seven heartbeats later Severus Snape materialised in the doorway. His impassive face twisted as it moved from Voldemort to Harry. Harry was sure he wore the same expression.

“My lord,” Snape finally drawled as he welcomed the pair in, voice strained.

Harry’s eyes sought Voldemort’s, trying to read the man’s face, his mind. But only somber darkness met him. Was this the surprise? Because it certainly qualified as one, just not the

pleasant kind. In spite of the initial dread, Harry felt a strange giddiness from having been right all this time. Snape *was* a Death Eater, and loyal to the Dark Lord. What would Dumbledore say now if he could see this?

But why had Voldemort brought Harry here? Did he not care that Snape now knew? Or was he aiming to improve the obvious animosity between them before they returned to Hogwarts? Make them act like civilised beings for a higher purpose?

Right, like that would ever happen.

Snape appeared to have the same dilemma, his inky eyes glued to Harry regardless of Voldemort's presence. What went through his head, Harry ached to know.

"My lord, would you desire coffee? Tea?"

Had Snape ever sounded so servile? Not that he could be blamed. Voldemort's presence could overwhelm if he desired it to… no, it overwhelmed without him even trying. That's who Voldemort was. Having this living menace in your cozy home on a soothing morning must have been terrifying.

Harry observed both men in silence, already used to Voldemort's commanding existence by now.

"It won't be needed. Our visit is a short one." A parchment materialised in Voldemort's hand before he handed it over to a reluctant Snape whose gaze hurried to scan its contents. "I require these this instant."

The greasy man nodded his greasy head. He folded the paper, stole one last look at Harry, and left the room before his steps echoed in the sharp silence.

Voldemort's hand raised without any reason at all as he faced Harry.

"You are not pleased."

A privacy ward.

"I hate him. And he hates me. I fail to understand why my presence was necessary."

"Hate… You once hated me, remember?"

"That's different," Harry said defensively.

"Different how?"

Harry gazed at the door Snape disappeared through before returning to Voldemort.

"I don't know how to explain… It was a different kind of hate. *He* always disliked me for no reason at all. Even before we exchanged a single sentence. You, on the other hand, were at least fair in your dislike. Both Quirrell-you and diary-you granted me the favour of having a civil conversation first."

“And then we aimed to murder you,” Voldemort concluded with some mirth.

Harry was convinced he flushed. “Well, yes, but… that’s different! And look, I’m literally making excuses for you and you’re not helping at all.”

Voldemort’s grey eyes burned holes into Harry's skin. He inched closer, not yet touching but close. Damn him and his handsome face. Harry's heart had the most fervent habit of clenching while looking up at it.

“I know you are, my soul,” Voldemort whispered. “Do not restrain yourself from doing so. It might even be a step in the right direction… and if you are wondering where that direction leads—”

“My lord?”

Voldemort’s eyes widened ever so slightly before he pulled away and all air returned to Harry’s lungs as breathing proved to be easy once again. With a small move of the Dark Lord’s fingers, the professor was able to hear again.

Snape leered at them, a tiny brown bag clutched in his hands. Maybe he took notice of their proximity and wondered why Harry was in his house with such abnormal company. What was he doing at Voldemort’s side, and unharmed, of all things? But the questions would have to remain questions. Snape couldn't exactly demand answers from Lord Voldemort himself.

When the mysterious bag transferred into the Dark Lord’s hands, Harry thought their visit would be over. That they would finally leave and head back to the manor. But he should have known Voldemort’s visit had no chance of being this brief or harmless.

“Severus,” the handsome Voldemort began, leisurely circling Harry’s teacher as if he were a predator and Snape the helpless prey. “You must be wondering why, of all people, Harry Potter is in my presence. In your living room. Alongside me. Alive and well.”

“I must confess I am,” the grave voice responded. “Last we knew of the young saviour, he had run away with some lover on a romantic escapade. The Order is restless in their search for him.”

Harry was unable to suppress a chuckle and Voldemort rolled his eyes.

“Sorry,” Harry mouthed.

“Do keep quiet, child. You’ll talk soon enough. Now, to answer your questions,” Voldemort began as he looked the other man in the eye. “Harry Potter is mine. He belongs to me of his own free will. If you wonder how that came to be, then do so, but listen. You’ll guard him with your life while at Hogwarts; from Dumbledore, from all harm. Do I make myself clear, Severus?”

“Of course, my lord,” stated Snape, head bowed. “Dumbledore would not touch him. I swear it.”

“You swear,” mocked Voldemort, and both Harry and Snape felt the swift change in the air. Of darkness growing into something vile. “Tell me, Harry, how much do words and promises weigh?”

That piercing gaze urged him to understand. That a game was begging to be played. So Harry played.

“Nothing. They weigh nothing.”

He could swear Voldemort’s eyes gleamed with approval. “Precisely, my Harry. Dust in the wind, they are… Visible to the eyes, ghostly to the touch… and yet. The road remains the same, the task remains the same. Severus… do not give me that look… I do not question your loyalty. We are merely taking further steps to ensure it.”

Then Voldemort extended his arm as if expecting Snape to hold it. Harry’s jaw clenched. He did not understand. Touching was… there was no need! Touching was forbidden. Voldemort did not touch people — his hands only ever grazed Harry to inflict pain or for whatever other purpose. But his hands trailed across Harry’s feverish skin and Harry’s skin only. This was meant to be a known fact… An unspoken truth. And Harry was inwardly raving like a spoiled child at the possibility of Voldemort touching another. Was that sane?

What would anyone say if they knew?

“My lor—” Snape began.

“Come, Harry, your wand,” the Dark Lord coaxed, and Snape’s voice snuffed out into nothingness. “The spell you learned days ago.”

If Harry’s confusion persisted, it soon vanished the moment Snape was shoved to his knees in the middle of the room. Voldemort followed; a requirement for the spell, but the image made Harry’s stomach tighten all the same.

Strangely enough, kneeling there made Voldemort appear more human than Snape. There was purpose in his grey eyes while in the black orbs of the other man there was nothing. Did the knowledge of being forever imprisoned in an Unbreakable Vow frighten him? With Voldemort of all people? But Harry saw nothing for sure. The professor’s face remained unchanged and uncaring even when he rose an eyebrow at Harry.

“Do get on with it, Potter,” Snape snarled.

The hold Voldemort had on the man’s arm visibly tightened and this time Snape *did* flinch.

Harry inched closer to the pair, placing the tip of his wand over the linked hands. He nodded at the Dark Lord and Voldemort commenced.

“Will you keep Harry’s secrets from Dumbledore and from any other person with the exception of those in this room?”

“I will,” responded Snape in a heartbeat, and Harry’s hand quivered as a flimsy line of fire emerged from his wand and laced around the hands of the pair.

Voldemort trailed on, unsatisfied, imposing.

“Will you protect Harry from Albus Dumbledore and those who would raise their wand to him even at the cost of your own life?”

“I will,” came the promise, and another thin snake made of fire took shape.

The spell broke the instant Voldemort’s hand retreated. It was done.

Harry watched Snape clench his fingers as if they were stiff while keeping a wary gaze on the Dark Lord. Harry knew whatever hate the greasy-looking man had for him before now had only doubled. Little difference it made. If Snape desired to protect his life, a single course of action prevailed. He desperately needed to preserve Harry’s safety. The complexity of the situation reeked of unscrupulousness. *Of Voldemort.*

It was safer thinking about Snape’s affairs than Harry’s own gratitude to the Dark Lord. All this had been fulfilled for Harry. The older man had done this for *him* . A surprise indeed.

“Serve well and I will never forget,” said Voldemort, unraveling Harry’s inner musings by making a vow of his own.

Snape composed himself by making his back a little straighter. “I know you won’t forget, my lord. Have no doubt that neither will I.”

No other words were offered. The door closed and from now on Snape’s life hung by a thread called *Harry* while the Dark Lord handled the scissors.

* * *

A mysterious battered man awaited in the obscure place Voldemort Apparated them to. From chains he hung, body draped against the wall like some sacrifice from an ancient tale. Unconsciousness blessed him.

“Wha—” Harry began but his voice faded. It was numbingly cold down here. How he knew *this* was *down,* he honestly had no idea. He just did.

Voldemort kept his silence, too busy retrieving different objects from Snape’s bag. Harry’s eyes widened as one thing followed another, dozens of them, and then some more. *Magic* . Jars in different colours and other tiny containers crowded the wooden table; the only piece of furniture decorating this place. Were they in the basement of the manor? Or a different place entirely? Where?

Soon enough, a significant portion of the objects were moved aside with a flick of Voldemort’s wrist. A bowl and a lonely jar remained to ponder upon.

“Countless things; some needed, most not. Severus must not know what will be born out of his ingredients,” the man explained with shadowed eyes. “Chances are slim that he would be able to successfully identify the purpose, even confronted with the specific components, yet one cannot ever be too careful.”

“Oh — okay,” Harry stammered, wrapping his arms around himself. “I’m cold, why don’t we —”

“No heating charms,” warned Voldemort, looking to him. “You’ll thank me later.”

Something monumental was approaching; no longer a shadow in the distance, but *here* . Harry could taste it in the air. Voldemort stunk of it.

“Now… you must be wondering who our guest is. I confess I did not bother to learn his name,” Voldemort began, and clutched Harry’s shoulder in his grasp, fingers lightly curling into the thin material of his jacket. “Off with this, my soul.”

Voldemort closely observed Harry to the point of perversion until the boy awaited shivering in front of him, obeying his every command. The hand returned. “Shall I tell you of this man? Shall I soften the imminent blow? Shall I be kind to you, Harry? Yes… I think I shall be merciful to my very soul. This man is a muggle, as you may have already guessed. A child rapist — a pedophile, as they name it. I possess a permissive soul — everyone has their little passions — but his happened to be quite young. How young, you must be wondering? When I searched his pitiful mind the youngest I discovered was four. He desires boys, pretty little boys gasping beneath him while crying and shivering until they’re starry-eyed and beg *no more* . Then he fucks them again. Shall I continue?”

“Why are you telling me this?” Harry croaked as tension settled over him. A feeling of w *rongness.*

They now stood in front of the muggle. Abruptly, the rapist awoke and feebly wrenched at his restraints, wild blue eyes on him and Voldemort and afraid to the point of weeping.

“Please! Who are you?” he begged, more at the boy than the man. “Please just let me go and I’ll tell no one, I swear! I—”

“Is my boy too old for your taste?” Voldemort inquired, hand abandoning Harry’s shoulder and letting the warmth melt away with it. “I always wondered about scum like you. Do you enjoy fucking only children below ten or do you sometimes make exceptions? Can you get it up for a *beautiful* exception?”

“Please, I don’t—”

“Better to answer me, I do not relish in asking a second time, remember? Now… do you find him beautiful?”

The muggle shuddered, cringing back against the wall as if wishing it would swallow him whole as tears gathered in his blue eyes. Not yet crying but close, Harry decided.

“I… I… yes — he… he’s beautiful.”

“Isn’t he?” drawled Voldemort, his satisfaction seeming to fill the room. “Look into his pretty eyes and confess what you’d do to him if you were to…. *meet* in different circumstances?”

The man sobbed now and Harry felt sick to his stomach.

“Please… please… I—” He seemed to remember something excruciatingly painful when Voldemort’s eyes met his. “I’d want him… on his knees at the beginning, with his mouth open.” Another sob wobbled through his body. “Then — th-then on his back so I could look at him while I—”

“Would you stop if he were to say no?”

Voldemort’s voice was colder than the room itself.

“No.”

“Please end this,” pleaded Harry, facing the Dark Lord, glancing anywhere else but the muggle. “Hurt him, kill him — Just let me leave… I don’t want to listen to anything he has to say. Snape was enough for today.”

“I know you do not, my soul. I wish him death as well. But I’m not needlessly cruel, Harry. Not to you. There was a purpose to his confession. It was to help you.”

“Help me?”

“Help you,” Voldemort echoed, coming so close Harry could feel his breath on his skin. “I fear for you, my soul. For your safety, for the thought of leaving this world, and of leaving me. Do you desire to leave me?”

“No,” Harry let out, the honesty of his reply choking him.

“Marvellous. We need to make sure something like this could never happen, with or without mine and Severus’ protection. I need you to be immortal, Harry. To ground yourself to this realm the same way I did. I want you to make a horcrux. I want you to kill this scum. *I want you to be safe* .”

Harry made to inch back but Voldemort seized his arm, bringing him against a firm chest.

“I would not force you, nor will I kill him for you. But before you rebel at the thought of ending another person’s life, do consider the purpose. There will be one less criminal, and you live with me forever to the end of days. You will live, Harry. This was more than I was given. The chance of not looking back. His repugnant taste is a blessing, so do not look me in the eye and tell me you don’t want him dead. Do not lie.”

Could Voldemort be this cruel? Play with his guilt, with his desire to live? The one thing that had brought them together? Then he recalled the man’s words. *Whoever told you the monster and the prince are required to be two different beings was a fool.* How right the Dark Lord

had been. But what if Voldemort meant well? What if he had Harry's best interest in mind? After all, the one whose soul he shared had peculiar ideas about devotion and things alike.

Even so…

"You don't understand—" Harry urged, trying to make the Dark Lord listen. "I trust you to keep me safe, you are more than enough! Truly, because I — I can't do it… I can't kill him, I don't think I—"

Voldemort's eyes softened. He circled Harry so that his back was to the Dark Lord's chest again as the other whispered into his ear, nose nuzzling Harry's neck. Fingers fiddled with something before pushing it into his numb hand. *Voldemort's wand.*

"It is not difficult. You're a smart boy. Think only about his acts, about those poor children. So many lives shattered with no hope of being repaired. Seeking their mother's warmth but unable to forget this man's hands and flinching when those women offer it. Standing back in revulsion of their own bodies. At how filthy they feel… And if even that image proves not enough, think of me. Make me proud, Harry. Just like you always do. Try."

Harry did, trusting in this ruthless man who, after taking him apart, was willing to sit and rearrange the pieces how he saw fit. Patience and dedication were required. Voldemort had them, and compelled Harry to do the same. *Try* .

When the green glow faded Harry went to his knees, whimpering. Whimpering for what? For who? Surely not for the muggle. For that disgusting piece of human being… No… Harry was crying for himself, for doing something he had pledged to never do. The Dark Lord killing people for sport was one thing but this was different. Harry had murdered someone. *He* had —

The *wet* sound anchored him to reality and Harry gasped between his tears.

Voldemort held the muggle's severed arm in his left hand, blood dripping down to the floor where it gathered in a small puddle. *Drip drip drip* like a bloody lullaby, a prelude to an eternal sleep.

"Would you prefer a leg?"

"What… what do you mean?" Harry finally managed to say, bile rising in his throat as he struggled not to throw up.

"Why do you think my followers are called Death Eaters?" Voldemort disclosed with amusement.

With one movement of his slender fingers, the flesh slid off the bone and into the empty bowl with a horrible sound. The mysterious contents from the jar followed and Harry clasped the man's wand until it stung. What was Voldemort doing? The answer he'd just received seemed like a clue, Harry cynically mused, just as the Dark Lord knelt in front of him and brought the bowl to his lips.

“Open wide, my soul. Make sure to swallow.”

This was the beginning of something greater. It had to be. Everything had a beginning. The unwilling one — the one when you’re born — and the one you chose for yourself. This monologue repeated in his head as the first chunk of meat slid past his lips.

Voldemort’s eyes resembled a hawk’s.

Harry gagged at the taste, liquid spilling over his lips. He went on, desperately needing this to be over, and pictured something else; bad house elf's cooking, muggle pub food, muggle’s flesh — *no* ! Voldemort’s palm clawed over his mouth to prevent him from spitting anything out while Harry spasmed against his hold, conscious of the meat sliding down his throat. Utterly disgusting, worse than any pain, worse than —

“Swallow for me, Harry. There you go, you can do it.”

When it was finished and he recited the phrases told by Voldemort with a gaping blood-filled mouth, Harry thought he understood why the Dark Lord had forbidden heating charms. Harry’s skin was burning hot — *all wrong* — while the softness in Voldemort’s eyes as his fingers touched Harry’s lips was full of innocence and wonder, spreading that fire inside of him.

Then the pain began.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

beta by the amazing Vanillaghost

In war, one can never refrain from choosing sides.

A few years ago Severus would have sneered at the presumption, yet now the balance had tipped and he was afraid they all stood on the losing side. The Light was being defeated with every passing moment and they were not even aware of it as Severus himself was unable to utter anything of value. Though he did try. He had to.

“I cannot say why but our situation has escalated in the wrong direction,” he had noted in one of his meetings with Albus.

Blue eyes remained serene while a damaged greyish hand supported itself atop a book neither of them were reading.

“How wrong is the wrong you mention?”

The image of Potter and the Dark Lord whispering to one another like children surfaced in Severus’ mind.

“More than you can ever imagine. He may have found out about the boy.”

This was no nightmare, despite how much he wished it was. Somehow — against all odds — Harry Potter had betrayed them, the little bastard. Dumbledore’s golden boy belonged to the Dark Lord. *How, how, how* ? The atrocity of it demanded answers. How could the brat look the monster in the eye and disregard his parents’ murder — *Lily’s body sprawled across the floor with all that red hair, the ugly mewls and the shattered windows* — of all pain and misery Voldemort had caused him and the rest of the world? What would Lily say if she saw her son now?

Severus never held high hopes or regard for the boy. He was James Potter’s son, after all. But this was something else. Foolishness and stupidity were polar opposites of betrayal, and such a betrayal it was. Potter was only a boy. A boy with a sealed fate, destined to meet his end at the Dark Lord’s hands. For the greater good. To save them all from the gruesome creature who now wore a human face. A realisation Severus could only comprehend after Lily’s death. Then begun the years and years of plans and whispers, playing his part for the Dark Lord, slowly guiding him to his own misfortune. The task had almost been too easy. Naturally, Voldemort had hated the reason for his demise and endured the imminent flow of time only so he could finish off the boy himself. Such an obsession with Potter he had, the name always on his lips; *find Potter and bring him to me. Find him, find him, find him* . The

Dark Lord had built his fixation so thoughtlessly, piling it like sand to make castles before he steadily waited to stamp it to the ground with the heel of his foot. Severus and Albus had counted on it, waiting and waiting and waiting. The trust in the plan cost them dearly.

But they had depended too much on a mad man's mania for a feeble boy, wasting precious time until the story reached its final stage. Meanwhile offering solace to a *traitor*. The flaw in their plan had spread like a disease. Here they had their answer for not trusting in Potter to sacrifice himself of his own free will… and now Voldemort may know of the horcrux. No… he *must* know, otherwise why else would he go to such lengths to ensure the boy's safety? Enough to involve himself in an Unbreakable Vow, even. But if he knew of Potter… he may already be on the move, transferring the other horcruxes far far away, no longer within reach or reason. All for a desperate fight to survive and put in motion, perhaps, by the boy. How right Severus had been in distrusting Potter. Fidelity was a frail thing, especially bargains involving stupid children. Children who would doom them all. Yes, *Voldemort and Potter must know*.

And Severus had both his tongue and his hands tied by a deadly golden thread. He had to protect the boy, even against Albus or anyone else who may raise their wand to him. *Damned be all.*

"How?"

"I do not know," Severus responded truthfully, occupying the chair in front of the headmaster's desk. Night blessed them with tranquillity, a translucent veil hiding all portraits in the office and lending the illusion of privacy.

And how the two had become civilised with one another made little difference. They simply had.

"This is… most troubling. Has the Dark Lord made any moves to ensure your supposed complicity?"

Severus almost smirked. This old man was a menace to see so much with a single glance. Or maybe Severus was familiar territory by now. *Unlike Potter* .

"Unfortunately."

A sigh escaped Albus as he leaned back in his chair. "He has Harry."

Severus' heart leaped into his throat.

"The boy has gone missing, according to his relatives, with his supposed lover whom none of his friends were even aware existed. And now the Dark Lord has found out about him being a horcrux. It is a good thing I do not place trust in coincidences. Voldemort has kidnapped our Harry yet I'm confident enough that he's alive. I know Tom very well. If he were to murder Harry, the horror of it would have already reached our eyes and ears. Finding out about him being a horcrux is the only explanation why he would still be alive."

What would you say if you knew the truth? That your precious boy willingly stays by the Dark Lord's side? Having sold himself like a cheap whore to the monster who killed his parents only so he may remain alive?

"You cannot help him save himself," Albus ventured, yet the hope creeping into his voice made it sound more like a question than a statement.

Potter and the Dark Lord gazing into each other's eyes.

Just try and pull them apart.

"No, I cannot."

Maybe he should at least try…

"Then we have no other choice," Dumbledore said. "Our plans will move forward more quickly. Harry needs us."

The absurdity of the situation reminded Severus of his school days. Of the times he knew the right answer but could not make himself raise his hand.

In spite of it all, he hoped for a better end.

* * *

Harry dreamed of ice and cold and Voldemort.

No — he wished for those. He wished as fire consumed him and he burned alive, eyes unseeing — not Voldemort, the blood, nor the ceiling. Just red and red and red. And the pain… death would have been kinder. The rapist's fate had been kinder than what Harry had to endure.

It would not stop.

As if little else was left to burn, the fire spread until it inhabited every inch of him, until he had no body part left to set ablaze. Harry discerned nothing. He could not move, he could not gain awareness of himself. *He could not cry.* Was a body even left of him or was it already ash? But if no flesh decorated his bones, why did it hurt so much? Why did it mutilate *him* ? Him, him, him. Who *was* him? A name… Harry. But who was this Harry? He caught on to something slithering away about this Harry when the pain doubled and then again and again until thinking was no more.

Only fire and a handsome man by the name of Tom remained.

* * *

Harry's eyelashes flew open. Against all odds, he was alive. Sore, but alive. There was only dark in front of his eyes and all around. *Not red.* Harry felt cheated in a way. Where had the pain gone? Something that had hurt so much had no right of leaving without a trace, as if it had never existed in the first place.

But was it the pain that was lacking?

No… it was Voldemort.

Harry pushed himself into a sitting position with aching bones, marvelling at the way his body moved; his joints, his fingers. All working wonderfully. Harry's legs wobbled underneath him as his bare feet padded against the chilly floors, following the tug that would lead him to the Dark Lord. The magic was mesmerising, ten times amplified by the horrifying ritual. He felt Voldemort's presence as clearly as he perceived his own body. Harry went on unsteadily, leaning on walls and railings until he reached the man in the library. The grey eyes were on him even before Harry actually entered.

Voldemort was a god.

A god whose face brightened everything around Harry and whose mere presence barely refrained from bringing Harry to his knees. But his parted mouth was not the only one in that room. Voldemort seemed just as wrecked as he came forward and did the most peculiar thing. An invitation was offered by way of open arms, one Harry took no time in throwing himself into. *Yes yes yes* , this was the puzzling missing part. Voldemort, who held him tight as if Harry was precious. Whose fingers carded through his hair and cradled his back while Harry did nothing else but clutch at the man's torso, breathing into his neck. It dawned on him then that while he cherished Hogwarts, his home was now another. Harry's home now had him in a strong grasp.

"Are you proud?" Harry asked in a faint voice muffled by Voldemort's shoulder. Such a comfortable shoulder it was too, calling for Harry to rest there and never pull away. It felt like a dream though he knew how much the Dark Lord despised those. But this indulgence… was there more to it than what met the eye? Was it a way to comfort Harry? To make him forget the savage act in the basement? It seemed unrealistic. It wasn't manipulation either. Voldemort's hold on him did not lie.

"You know I am, *my soul* . Come now."

He took Harry's weight by almost carrying him to the couch. Touching, they were touching and Harry wanted nothing more than to glue his hands over Voldemort's chest and feel his heartbeat that drummed because of what Harry had done. This was good, very good. His pain had had a purpose then. It washed away the meaninglessness, leaving Voldemort's existence the sole answer.

"Do you resent me?"

Harry blinked at the handsome man now kneeling in front of him. He pushed away from the arm of the couch to lean down in Voldemort's space. Feeling completely at home.

“You made me eat the rapist’s flesh — *human flesh* . I though I might die from it… but then the burning started and again I thought I’d die. Maybe I did… at some point I was a stranger to myself. No name, no body, no one but you for company. Do you realise? I remembered Lord Voldemort before I remembered myself. I have countless reasons to resent you and yet I cannot. I’m unable to hate *you* .”

“I’ve been starving as well, my soul,” Voldemort raved, stormy eyes glowing. “Oh, the things you did for me. Harry, you gave me what I wanted and then some. I watched you chew on that man and I could not believe my eyes. Our bond… it grew to the point of ruin.” He gripped Harry's chin, breathing in his air. “Ties are a hard thing to grow and maintain. The petty things require such attention for one has to keep them from breaking, either by force or free will. Before I could start on the first course of action, you took my hand and ran the other way. I should despise the arrogant child for doing this. And yet…”

“And yet?” Harry echoed.

“And yet I do not. Perhaps your soul is to blame.”

Harry’s heart leapt into his throat, Voldemort’s hold on his chin a solid grounding to forgetting the slippery thing that had been in his mouth only who-knew-how-long ago.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m your horcrux now, Harry. You kept my soul for so long it was only fitting that I should return the favour. We are truly sharing souls now.”

This time… this time Harry understood. The incompleteness he felt when not in Voldemort's arms or in his very presence. It made perfect sense to feel what the Dark Lord felt when he was looking at Harry, and if that thought did not thrill him, what else could? And yet… Voldemort had invoked these irrational feelings even before the horcrux. Before the murder. When a far more mortal Harry gazed at the man just like this.

What was the right name for what they were?

Soulmates soulmates soulmates, the back of Harry’s traitorous mind whispered.

“How could you go through this more than once?” Harry asked. “Willingly, and knowing the pain it causes?”

Voldemort hummed, brushing Harry’s lower lip with the tip of his finger like the time he did before the pain begun. “For power. For tranquillity and purpose. For safety.” He pulled away so that their skin was not touching and the breath Harry drew was audible to them both. Voldemort summoned a chair to face him as they spoke. “How are you feeling?”

“Too calm. Like… like I see more clearly… as if something has been lifted from my heart—”

“From your *soul* , my soul,” corrected Voldemort. “A good portion of your guilt is missing. The memory with the muggle, for instance. Tell me, Harry, what do you feel when you think of it?”

It was a good question, one that Harry did not immediately answer. The shame, disgust, despair and pain; his emotions. He could not feel them now no matter how much he strived for it. Harry struggled to make himself sick to his stomach by going back to the slippery meat that slid down his convulsing throat. But nothing came. They were only memories now… The same as when other people told you about their experiences and you can only look at it from an objective point of view, attempting to understand, when most of the time you are unable to relate. Now Harry felt disconnected to his past emotions in the same way.

“Absolutely nothing,” Harry simply responded. “But why is my numbness immune to you?”

The hand Voldemort offered seem dangerous. *Alive* . Harry approached it with caution at first, then ended up interlocking their fingers like an eager child. The other man smirked as if learning a secret.

“You see, we are different from the rest. From everybody who has and has not been born yet. We are distorted from how alike we are. *We, we, we* . I should detest it. This lack of individuality in relation to you. Yet it’d be as if I were mad at my own legs, my tongue, my eyes. You, Harry Potter, you are mine. Part of my soul. Part of myself. Now we have even more. I, who have lived more years than you, opened this cage of bones to your warmth. And now we share more than a few secrets. No doubt you tremble at my touch.”

“The same way you do, my lord,” Harry offered.

The handsome Voldemort did not deny it, only brushed his lips across Harry’s knuckles.

How madly Harry’s heart danced in the company of this man’s eyes.

“Go, immerse yourself in a bath. Warm your flesh for as long as you desire. For tomorrow the pieces will move across the board. And Harry? Do get rid of those glasses. They ruin the colour of your eyes and I wish to clearly glimpse them when you look at me.”

He watched Harry as he left, bare feet finding pleasure against the coldness of the floors. The attention felt strange to Harry. Unfamiliar but not unwelcome.

*** * ***

The sun was set low as they strode down Diagon Alley almost a month later.

The Dark Lord walked on his right and none of the other wizards or witches had any idea. They only recognised The Boy Who Lived in the company of a mysterious silver-haired man. Curious yet calm eyes followed the pair as they walked. After all, Dumbledore had not

alerted the wizarding world of Harry's disappearance from his tender care, and in doing so, did Harry and Voldemort a favour.

Harry was on edge in spite of the smile on his face, standing close to Voldemort who towered over the crowd with ease.

"They would scream if they knew who you were."

An amused smirk played across the Dark Lord's lips as they neared the joke shop named *Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes* . But a tight grimace soon followed when they spotted the sign over the entrance.

"WHY ARE YOU WORRYING ABOUT YOU-KNOW-WHO?

YOU SHOULD BE WORRYING ABOUT U-NO-POO —

THE CONSTIPATION SENSATION THAT'S GRIPPING THE NATION!"

"And some would bow," Voldemort replied with certainty.

Harry said nothing but reached for his hand, *a home he did not want to leave,* and walked on.

Inside the shop, chaos reigned. A multitude of bright colours assaulted their eyes. It was filled with people gasping at various trinkets. *Skiving Snackboxes* , a *Reusable Hangman* and the famous *Extendable Ears* , succeeded by the special section of *Muggle Magic Tricks* . At the other end of shop, where a large portion of the crowd had made their way toward, was Fred and George's special *WonderWitch* products — *Love Potions, Ten-Second Pimple Vanishers* and *Pygmy Puffs*. Voldemort's hold on Harry's hand turned throbbing but not entirely unpleasant.

Such merriness all around. It was difficult to believe it was the same world as the one in which Harry had consumed human flesh and split his soul. He and Voldemort were like strangers lost in an abnormal land.

"There," Harry said when he spotted the familiar pair of redheads in an animated conversation with a customer. His heart gave a stubborn tug. So close… and yet he did not want to do this.

" *I'll never leave you, my soul* ," Voldemort pledged in Parseltongue, sensing his companion's distress. " *Letting you go is a terrible thing. I thought about it last night after you went to bed. About my life without you. Harry, Harry… you'll laugh at my revulsion of this plan. I do not want you to leave, yet you must. By placing one foot in front of the other is how we'll win. And after we win there's no setting us apart. I swear on our souls* ."

" *I'll do it* ," Harry promised as George finally spotted him and began making his way toward Harry, bumping into numerous people as he did so and no doubt muttering excuses. "And… I

lied that day you returned from checking on the horcruxes. I did miss you, just the same as I'll miss you now."

Voldemort's nails dug into Harry's skin. "And you thought I did not know?"

But Harry's reply never came. George arrived too early, his brother following close behind.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

beta by the amazing Vanillaghost

The worst thing in the world is having to be where you no longer desire to be.

The school year approached with an inevitability after which Harry felt like a bird imprisoned in a cage that was not even gold. In a gloomy house filled with people, Harry was more alone than ever. Mrs Weasley beamed at him, Ron nudged his shoulder, and everyone else was happy. Too happy in comparison with Harry. Even Hermione was at Grimmauld Place, and she and Ginny complained about the few letters he had sent during the summer on top of missing his birthday too. Harry had only smiled and insisted it was no problem at all.

After all, Voldemort's gift had been more than enough for a lifetime.

Sirius was the hardest to avoid and trick, especially on a day such as today. In less than a few minutes Dumbledore would arrive at Grimmauld Place to finally meet up with Harry. He could hardly wait.

"Do you miss that boyfriend of yours so much?" His godfather teased as they stood in the kitchen with the twins and Mr Weasley, waiting for the inevitable. "You've been awfully quiet since the young man dropped you off."

George snickered from where he slouched against the wall, elbowing his twin. "For a moment I thought he was dating bloody Malfoy with all that platinum hair and sharp cheekbones."

Sirius snorted. "My Harry has better taste."

Sirius would be thrilled to know he spoke true. Lord Voldemort *was* better than Draco Malfoy in every possible sense of the word. Though Harry knew for a fact his godfather would not smile quite as charmingly if he knew the identity of his companion. And Voldemort was definitely not his boyfriend, the whole conversation on the subject was as real as a dream could aspire to be. A genuine smile escaped Harry at the idea. Dreams and Voldemort tended to include each other these days, especially considering the man's disdain for them.

"He's more handsome than Malfoy," Harry could not help but mention. More than handsome. *Lord Voldemort was divine*. The glamour he'd used back in Diagon Alley would be no less beautiful than his real face. The Dark Lord was a vain creature, after all.

"And to think the boy is a descendant of the Selwyns…" Arthur marvelled with wide eyes.

“He wouldn’t be the first bastard heir to an otherwise extinct family.”

Bless Sirius and his insight on the subject. He and Voldemort had counted on that.

“Well, Erich always knew—” Harry’s voice died in his throat when green flames flared in the fireplace and the familiar figure of Albus Dumbledore emerged in the dining room with not a speck of dust marring his robes.

Time for the lies. But what if Harry messed up and ruined everything?

Shivers ran through Harry and he wished this meeting over before it even began. The benevolent expression he offered seemed like treachery now, though Harry forced himself to wear it. “Professor,” he acknowledged, willing his face still.

“Harry, my boy. It is a relief to see you safe and well.”

“Why wouldn’t I be? I thought my living conditions were mentioned in my letters.” The tone was too sharp and Dumbledore stared at him. *First mistake.*

“Oh. That you did. But do consider that letters are not the most trustworthy source of information in these dark times. Our worry was well-founded. Now,” Dumbledore droned, offering Sirius and Mr Weasley a warm look. “Would you mind terribly if Harry and I continued this discussion in a more private setting?”

“Of course not. We’ll be in the kitchen. Take all the time you need.”

Thanks, Sirius.

Harry watched them leave before the door fell shut with a decisive sound. A privacy ward should follow for additional protection due to Dumbledore’s tremendous paranoia, and soon enough fingers flicked when —

“Sir, what happened to your hand?”

It… looked like a dead man’s hand. Greyish going on black, wrinkled for more reasons than old age, and utterly hideous. *Rotting* . Harry could not keep his eyes off of it. This was unforeseen. A wound marred Dumbledore's skin and Harry had read enough about dark magic in the past months to know the effects of a nasty curse when he saw one. In what affairs had the man stuck his nose into? *Mighty Dumbledore mutilated by someone else’s hand* — A pun indeed. Voldemort would be jealous for being robbed of the honour.

“Ah, well, let us say I should not have touched what I did.” *That had been pretty clear, thank you very much* . “And some after effects could not be avoided in spite of my efforts and Professor Snape’s timely action.” Blue eyes twinkled.

“Oh. That’s good.”

Voldemort would have been so proud of Harry for not reacting to any of that. Now, with the given situation…

Snape knew of Dumbledore's hand. Which meant the Dark Lord should be aware as well. Yet, if this was the case, why keep it quiet from Harry? For what reason? It made no sense. And if Voldemort did *not* know, either Snape had concealed precious information or this had occurred sooner than presumed.

Dumbledore took the place Sirius previously occupied and looked at Harry over the brim of his glasses. "My boy, I apologise for beginning our conversation this way, but I do need to ask and I do need you to be honest with me." He articulated each word with gravity. "Have you had any contact with Lord Voldemort during the summer?"

"No, sir," Harry lied, staring the man straight in the face and not dwelling on the prospect of mind reading. What was it that Voldemort had said in the middle of the sea? *Do not fret about your unguarded mind for now. Lord Voldemort takes good care of the things which belong to him* . Harry trusted him enough to meet Albus Dumbledore's eyes and not fear. "Only dreams, fractions of dreams… Nothing clear, just flashes and glimpses. He's angry for whatever reason… Did something happen?"

"Has Sirius told you nothing?" The headmaster did not even try to make this inquiry at least resemble a veritable discussion.

"No, sir, I arrived only yesterday evening and we kind of talked about other things…"

"Well, then I'm afraid I bear unpleasant news. The war is going badly."

Did Dumbledore suspect him? Nothing out of the ordinary swum in those blue eyes yet Harry simply could not relax. Perhaps he was being paranoid. Too frightened that Dumbledore would see right through his lies and somehow judge Harry had made a horcrux. That the hands settled in his lap were stained with enough blood to seep through his clothing.

No, his fears were only his overactive imagination. No matter how powerful a wizard was, no magic could tell whether one had fractured their soul or not. Voldemort had said so himself.

"War? What do you mean?"

Dumbledore sighed and in that instant resembled a tired old man so acutely it made Harry uncomfortable.

"Ever since his resurrection, Voldemort plotted in the shadows. Yet lately, the shadows have been lurking in the real word. He's not wasting any time. Pacts have been made with dark creatures; not only dementors, but vampires, werewolves, acromantulas, trolls, and chimaeras as well. Sides are being carefully divided as we speak. More and more muggles are missing and members of the Order are so terrified for their lives — for their families — that no one wanders on their own except when absolutely necessary. Harry, people vanish daily, never to come back in one piece. I'll spare you the gruesome details. Your running away from the Dursleys was not the wisest of decisions considering the context. You foolishly endangered yourself when Voldemort has been searching for you every second of every waking hour, like a starved beast stalking its prey."

It was not difficult to reconstruct Dumbledore's story in his mind, bleeding like watercolours into the bits he already knew.

"I'm sorry for worrying you, sir. Truly. I did not really think. I was just so… in love."

In the blink of an eye the rest of Harry's remaining soul was shattered. *Love* .

What about love?

Ah, yes, the love from fairy tales. The ones Voldemort mentioned. What was it that happened at the end of those stories? The princess falls in love with the beast who hides a prince beneath his skin. A beast who forcefully separates her from all that is familiar and becomes her lover. She adores him in spite of it. Why wouldn't she? He showed her kindness… sometimes. He gave her fine garments and shaped her wishes into reality. They were caught in stimulating conversations until late at night. They took walks together. They read to each other…

And at some point during Harry's musings there was no beast. Only Voldemort. *Love.*

Voldemort.

Harry loved Voldemort.

His world had changed and he could not run the other way ever again. *Harry did not wish to.* Rationally, he should have been disgusted and horror stricken by such a feeling. But had love ever stood within reason? There was only Voldemort — Tom Riddle and his brilliancy. The way the man held himself, his handsome face, his unthinkable power, the way steady hands brushed Harry's skin… Why should Harry be ashamed of loving this man? Because of all the blood and misery? His long dead parents? The murders and the terror? Perhaps. Yet the sheer desire and *love* outweighed anything else.

He loved Voldemort.

Dumbledore offered a half smile. "Oh, to be young and feel love's keen sting," he mused. "May I be so bold as to ask who the lucky person is?"

"Of course," Harry hurried to add, although he was sure Dumbledore already knew. "His name is Erich Selwyn, a former student at Durmstrang."

An eyebrow white as snow arched. "Selwyn? I was under the impression the family perished right before Voldemort himself did, thus it appears none are as dead as most people believed them to be…"

"Erich used to be an illegitimate child, sir. Just finished going through the legal proceedings the past year, checking blood ties and such…"

A lie after another. No Erich Selwyn existed, just Erich Kaltherzig. A rather unlucky young man, an orphan with no one to weep over the loss of his life. Voldemort had made use of Karkaroff and his influence wisely.

“Am I to assume you two met last year during the Triwizard Tournament?”

“Yes, Sir.”

Now this was not a lie nor a dream. Perched upon the bones of Voldemort’s father, Harry had been touched by the Dark Lord for the very first time. They had really gazed at one another in the face. Back then, Voldemort was still the beast trapping the princess in his castle. But, unlike her, Harry had escaped on his own. Naturally, Voldemort pursued and assaulted Harry’s mind until he obtained what he desired.

Well, not quite. Back then, death had been Harry’s fate. The horcrux laughed at it all.

A muffled sound from the other end of the door made them look over at it, neither one of them really surprised. The Weasley twins must have been trying to make use of their Extendable Ears to no avail. Dumbledore was anything but careless. It seemed the both of them had the same thought as the headmaster’s eyes sparkled with laughter.

“Such faithful companions you have. They worry about their friend at any time.”

Worry ? More like morbid curiosity.

“Sir,” Harry edged. “Again, I apologise for worrying you but I was in no danger with Erich this summer.”

“Where were you, my boy?”

Supposing Harry even wished to tell the truth, such a thing was not in the realm of possibility. Voldemort had kept his secret about the manor and the cliff in the middle of the sea. To Harry, it still remained a mystery for the time being.

“Germany,” Harry lied. “The location is secret. A complicated matter concerning the house belonging to his family. Even I do not know of it.”

“Yes, one can never be too careful,” Dumbledore sighed. “There is always the danger of betrayal where momentous secrets are concerned. But I’m afraid curiosity gets the better of me this time. After all, the Selwyns were loyal to Lord Voldemort during the recent war….”

“Erich is nothing like his family.”

Indulgence swum in Dumbledore’s blue eyes. “Perhaps. My boy, now it is my turn to apologise concerning my distant behaviour from last year. I was… worried. Voldemort’s connection to you was an unknown variable and a great risk factor, as you well know. It was dishonourable of me but the necessity for anonymity remained. The false vision of Sirius proved my theory right. And yet I wonder… back at the Ministry… why had Voldemort left so early? What happened to you and the prophecy?”

They had talked about this before, the first time Harry lied to the man. Now it was the same question again. Dumbledore did not trust him enough. *Why?*

Harry shrugged and stretched his legs in a nonchalant manner. “I don’t know. He and his Death Eaters appeared in the prophecy room as I was ready to take the orb. Voldemort threatened me to hand it over and before I had the chance to either fight or run, Sirius and the Order arrived. We got away, Hermione’s hand slipped away from mine and I guess I thought about the safest place I knew…”

“Hogwarts,” Dumbledore concluded with ease, and the tiniest bit of happiness.

“Yes.”

“Well… his quietness concerning you is most alarming. There’s no doubt Voldemort is plotting but I’m very glad you are safe and back with us. I ought to thank your companion for taking such good care of you.”

Well, wouldn’t that be hilarious?

“Maybe you’ll have the chance sometime soon.”

“I certainly hope I will.”

They left the dangerous road this conversation led to for now.

* * *

In the heat of the night, sleep would not keep him company. Harry’s mind was unsettled with countless thoughts like an angry ocean during a storm. A storm that rose above them all.

He had done it . He had lied to Albus Dumbledore and had gotten away with it. Mostly. The trust between them was not what it had once been but Dumbledore was unaware of the truth — the only thing that really mattered in the end. Harry’s bond with Voldemort had escaped his sharp blue gaze. *Harry’s betrayal.*

What would his parents say? Or Sirius, Ron, Hermione, and all the people in this house? And why did the thought leave him cold? It was as if Harry knew he should regret his actions except he was unable to conjure the actual feeling. Was the horcrux at fault? The piece of his soul sheltered in Voldemort’s chest, closer to the heart holding them both alive? What else?

It made little difference now anyway as Ron snored in the bed across from his and Harry had to hold himself back from choking the ginger with a pillow. The scariest thing was the lack of amusement at the thought and the childishness that had once been there. Fingers twisted in the sheets and Harry breathed through his mouth. *Wrong wrong wrong.* He had the strangest urge to bawl . So many things had happened, all these people fretting around him. The noise, the clatter of plates and glasses, Dumbledore, and the gripping realisation that Voldemort possessed not only one fragment of Harry’s soul but all of it. His heart too. What did you offer people when you loved them? Your heart or your soul? In any case, Voldemort owned them both.

Ron snored yet again and Harry left the bed and then the room, not trusting himself to remain there any longer.

He padded down the stairs, hoping not to wake anyone least of all the screaming portrait of Walburga Black. The darkness was banished with the help of his wand and Harry's legs froze as if suddenly emerged in cold water.

A memory shattered his mind.

Harry floated in water cold as ice, his breath coming out in white puffs and painting the blackness closing around him. Something even colder touched his bare feet from under the water but Harry was not startled. Three gulps of water later and strong hands settled on his bare hips when there stood Tom Marvolo Riddle, drops of water staining his perfect face and sliding across his lower lip like tears. A smile, a touch, and that was all.

Voldemort's vision from the cliff.

Voldemort called to him in front of a door with a sign reading: *Do Not Enter Without the Express Permission of Regulus Arcturus Black* hung above the threshold. Sirius' brother's room.

Harry naturally entered and his eyes filled with green and silver; the trademark Slytherin colours. It covered everything. The walls, the bed, and even the windows. Above the bed *Toujours Pur* was sprayed as a silent reminder of who had lived here. Looking at it all, the younger of the Black brothers had been the poster boy for Slytherin. Even Voldemort's own home lacked the colour. Harry awkwardly stood in the middle of the bedroom. Why was he here in the middle of the night? There was no Voldemort sitting at the desk or by the window to keep him company. And still…

A whisper fractured the shadows.

From the desk beside an old newspaper with Voldemort's name written over it in bold letters, the Dark Lord's soul murmured. Harry's wand almost slipped from his fingers at the sight of Voldemort's horcrux innocently intertwined with a rusty pocket watch. Harry tripped over his own legs in his rush to reach it. The breath which escaped his lips from the sight of the golden locket safe in his hands was astonished. *Voldemort's soul had not been destroyed. Voldemort's soul was safe.*

With a hand over his mouth, Harry laughed. "I will keep it safe for you," he whispered softly against his own palm, somehow hoping Voldemort could hear…

No one answered yet the real locket throbbed in his hold as if it were *alive.*

* * *

Harry almost expected to catch sight of Voldemort's handsome face at King's Cross station on the morning of September first. It was that much he missed the man, his very soul, and the chance to see one another.

But only strangers met his stare.

In one of the train compartments with his friends, Harry tried not to sulk at Voldemort's absence. The Dark Lord had things to take care of and a whole war to win. Besides, Harry was no child in need of careful grooming. To be held and seen off with a smile and a hug if possible. At least that's what he told himself as the annoying conversation buzzed around him. Merlin, he had a headache — which was only briefly soothed by the knowledge that Voldemort's soul rested within his heart like a soundless mantra.

"You fixed your vision," noted Ginny at some point, gesturing to the obvious absence of Harry's glasses.

Harry shrugged, distracted as he looked out the window. "Erich didn't like my glasses."

"This Erich sounds like a real prick."

Harry's eyes flashed and Hermione had the decency to elbow an oblivious Ron Weasley. The subject was quickly changed.

At least they left him alone and for that Harry was grateful. Having caught sight of Voldemort back at the Ministry, his friends must have the impression the man occupied a vast amount of space in Harry's thoughts every waking hour. They were not entirely wrong. Talking in hushed voices of everything that concerned the Dark Lord, Harry listened and attempted to conceal his amusement. Had he ever been like these children? Of course Harry was a teenager as well, but the horcrux he had made seemed to have happened years — not weeks — ago. Had Harry changed that much in such a little time?

Judging from the looks he got from his schoolmates it appeared he had.

Whatever.

* * *

Snape would not meet his eyes at the welcoming feast. Harry wasn't exactly surprised, as the newly appointed Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher was caught in a rather lengthy conversation with McGonagall. The dessert had just been served and Harry distracted himself by picking through an apple pie, or rather; playing around than actual eating. Ever since the horcrux's creation, Harry's appetite had decreased. Food and drink left him cold. He ate the bare minimum and only out of necessity.

His friends and pretty much everyone besides the Slytherins were unnerved due to the most recent changes in staff. They all had been aware a new Defence teacher was in store just like

any other year, but to have Snape fulfil that role was unexpected. Or so to speak. Meanwhile the vacant Potions job had been handed to one Horace Eugene Flaccus Slughorn — Professor Slughorn, from now on. The aged fellow sitting at the high table rubbed Harry the wrong way. At least, Harry hoped, Potions would not suck quite as badly as it had with Snape.

A wave of amusement hit Harry at the thought. As if he really cared about either Potions or the greasy-haired man. He was here with plans; to retrieve the Diadem and spy on Dumbledore, not stress about petty exams and homework. Besides, whatever magic Voldemort deemed important, Harry had already been taught it by the man himself. As if any of these teachers could compare with the Dark Lord and his superior intellect.

As soon as it was safe to leave, Harry did so, feet carrying him away from the Great Hall and far past Gryffindor dorms. He needed to think, needed air. He needed solitude. And in truth, he needed Voldemort.

The place Harry found himself after minutes of aimlessly wandering around was an open balcony almost as high as the Astronomy Tower, and fortunately far less populated. It also came with a stunning view of the lake and school grounds. A faint wind blew in the autumn afternoon and filled Harry with something akin to peace, a feeling which had evaded him ever since Grimmauld Place. Now that same lingering feeling soaking through his bones had returned. After all, Hogwarts still had a place in his heart, not to mention the striking picture before his eyes. The water, the sun, the wind… They were all elements of an enchanting land. A fairytale to entertain himself with.

My, what a face Voldemort would have made at this idea…

“You remind me of him.”

The crystalline voice startled Harry. A female ghost floated behind him. It was his first time seeing her. Ghosts weren’t quite as fascinating as before, back when he was a child no older than eleven. Now they were just awfully dead and boring. This one appeared no different, not to mention the fact that she had snuck up on Harry so effortlessly. Or had he been the one to overstep and trespass into her territory by accident?

“Excuse me? Remind you of who?”

“A handsome man,” the dead woman responded dreamily, like Luna would. “He used to come here, stood just where you do now, and gaze at the lake for hours at a time. Always alone, always silent… At first.” Both her voice and her outline trembled. “If only his face had been as ugly as his soul… We would have been spared so many tragedies.”

Harry narrowed his eyes at the ghost. “Are you going to tell me who this mysterious person is?” he pressed, impatient. “You do know it’s quite strange to come to people speaking like this…”

“You remind me of him so much,” she trailed on, unfazed, while placing distance between them as if being in close proximity with Harry was an unpleasant experience. *As if Harry was filthy* . “The way you hold yourself, the look in your eyes, the way you speak… And

something else I cannot name. Who, do you ask? You know him well, Harry Potter. He is the monster that gifted you your scar."

Voldemort. This ghost knew Voldemort. Knew him well enough to despise him. And of course when Harry made to further question her, none other than bloody Neville made his appearance, face flushed with exertion. He had run up here, most probably. His eyes flicked between the ghost and Harry, letting out a long breath of relief when she faded away into the distance. Great. Awkward Neville Longbottom had spoiled Harry's opportunity to hold an interesting conversation about Voldemort as well as the chance to find out more about this woman who resented the Dark Lord. Just great.

"Did something happen?"

Neville nodded and slowly came to join Harry, resting his forearms on the railing.

"Well… I guess — I mean yes, it did," Neville stammered, glancing down at the grounds, not at Harry. "I'm not even sure I should say this, but keeping it a secret simply doesn't sit well with me. Besides, it really does concern you as well. Dumbledore would understand."

Dumbledore . Now Harry was intrigued. "The headmaster? What do you mean?"

"You remember the Ministry," Neville said. "The prophecy, *You-Know-Who* , everything. Well… my summer went just as the ones before. My granny, our house, reading, exchanging letters with the rest of our friends and then, out of the blue, Dumbledore came to visit. Right in the first week of vacation. He asked me about what happened with Voldemort. About the prophecy."

Terror must have reigned over Harry's face.

Don't panic, don't be shocked, he could not know, Dumbledore could not know…

"What about it?"

Neville still wasn't looking at him and in that Harry rejoiced.

"Him asking me about it seemed kind of strange considering you two must have already talked, but of course I told the truth. How you were unable to take hold of the prophecy —" *No.* "How You-Know-Who arrived and you two spoke in Parseltongue —" *No.* "About the fight and how we ran away and were separated, and all the rest." *No. This could not be happening* . "But, that's not important. What Dumbledore said to me… He said the Chosen One wasn't Harry Potter but me. Dumbledore came and told me that, told me about Sybill Trelawney's prophecy, how both he and You-Know-Who had believed the child was you but then your hand was unable to enter through the enchanted wall and… this means I'm the Chosen One and I have to defeat *him* and now Dumbledore is having me visit him in his office, showing me strange memories and I really can't do this!"

Don't panic, don't be shocked.

If Dumbledore knew the whole truth Harry wouldn't be here. *But Dumbledore knew and Voldemort did not!*

“I…” Harry hesitantly began. “I don’t know how to react to this. I mean… my whole life I thought I was the Chosen One and now you tell me…”

“I understand, Harry, I really do. And I think it scares me more than it has ever scared you.”

Dumbledore was aware Harry had lied and now the man had passed Harry’s so-called mission to Neville, like a back-pack or something similar. Harry’s fingers stiffened against the railing from the anger and horror.

“And the memories… you said something about memories.”

Now he walked on a minefield.

“Yeah, about some family who spoke in Parseltongue. The Gaunts, I think… They were very poor and dirty. A Ministry official named Bob Ogden visited that run-down house to investigate a muggle attack… The family was miserable, especially the poor girl with the golden locket. Her father tried to beat her for fancying that muggle, right in front of the Ministry official. It was all very confusing, there were whispers I couldn’t understand. You should have been there… you would’ve understood…”

Parseltongue, a forsaken household, a girl with a golden locket and eyes for only one muggle…

Surely you didn't think I would keep my filthy Muggle father's name , came Tom Riddle’s words from Harry’s second year.

A golden locket…

Then it had to be! It made perfect sense! The horcruxes were no secret to Dumbledore. He had memories of the locket around Harry’s neck! If he caught sight of it…

Voldemort’s soul was in great danger and Harry was fucking stuck in school, unable to do a thing. The Dark Lord had not entered his mind since the beginning of the summer, leaving Harry mute, severing their link. *And Dumbledore had found out about the horcruxes* . But not about what they were, at least not yet.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said to break the silence, to mask the hysteria bubbling underneath. “I’m sorry you were passed this burden.”

He could do this. As long as Neville kept him informed of Dumbledore’s moves, Harry could work around that.

“It’s ok, Harry,” the other boy hurried to add, staring off into the distance. “It’s not your fault.”

Nothing was ok.

The conversation dragged on for a while and when it finally came to a close, Harry had to slowly descend the countless stairs, accompanied by Neville all the way to the Gryffindor Common Room, acting like everything was normal. As if his heart was not in his throat and his and Voldemort's soul was in danger.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

beta by the amazing Vanillaghost

By the time everyone retired to sleep, Harry had made use of his invisibility cloak and raced down the stairs all the way to the dungeons. He bumped into no one on his way to Snape's chambers. He wasn't sure what he would have done if such a thing happened. How could Harry explain his presence here in the middle of the night, seeking the Defence professor of all people? He wasn't even sure how Snape would react to his unannounced visit.

The faint heartbeat of Voldemort's soul against his chest made a mockery of all his worries, as if saying it did not matter. They had other, more urgent problems to lose sleep over. Like the fact that *Dumbledore knew* .

Snape was not asleep when he welcomed Harry into his living quarters without a word. None was needed to catch sight of the sheer distress of having Harry here.

"I need to talk to him," Harry demanded after the door was closed and gave the illusion of a safe space.

"And I need a vacation. What are the odds of that happening, you tell me."

"This isn't funny!" Harry hissed, closing in on the man like never before. "It's more urgent than you can imagine and I need to talk to him right now!

Snape gazed down at him with black eyes, as if Harry was a noisy insect standing in his way. "Potter," the man sighed, awfully exasperated and yet *calm* . "Whatever your urgency may be, I cannot take you out of Hogwarts as I see fit. For one, Dumbledore would notice your disappearance and two, I do not possess the knowledge on how to reach the Dark Lord. He summons *us* , not the other way around. Now, if you really are as desperate as you claim, tell me the problem and I'll make sure to inform our lord next time he calls me to him."

Did Harry really look that stupid to him? Unbreakable Vow or not, Harry did not trust Snape. The greasy haired man savoured Harry's suffering like a fine wine. *Not to mention he knew nothing about Voldemort's soul.* Enough strangers already knew about it. First Dumbledore, then soon enough Neville. The disaster was slowly creeping in.

Harry huffed, hands in his hair while breathing in and out, pacing across what could only be Snape's living room. The single table in the room stood in his way and Harry had to fight the urge to tear it apart. His anger would lessen soon, yet the problem still remained. What had happened to him? Harry was so angry, his temper burning like smouldering fire. Everything was just so *wrong* . His and Voldemort's plans seemed so unreachable now… it was ruined,

everything was ruined and the horcruxes…! Merlin, Harry needed to stay calm. He may as well doom them both if he kept behaving like this. It had to be the splitting of his soul. There was no other reasonable explanation he could find. Well, it was either that or Harry was going crazy.

“Absolutely not. This is between me and the Dark Lord. No one else can know.”

Snape raised a brow at him. “Would a letter do the trick?”

“No, I cannot sa—”

“You stupid child,” Snape interrupted. “I can inform him you wish to speak, not of the secrets between you two. Now, shall I do that?”

Harry studied him. The logical thing was to say yes. After all, that’s why Voldemort had made the Vow. But relying on Snape… Still, no other choice presented itself.

“Fine, a letter. Write him a letter but say it’s most urgent.” Harry hesitated at the last part. “Tell him it’s about *us* .”

Snape sneered, already gathering the utensils needed for the letter. He shoved Harry out of his way to reach the table. Then their eyes met. “You were chosen by the Dark Lord and now you think yourself special. A little advice, Potter. Never start dancing with anything immortal. You may die on your feet.”

Oh, how Harry *loathed* this man. “I think you’re the one who should be concerned about dying. After all, we both know who the one held in an Unbreakable Vow is,” Harry spoke with cruelty.

“Get out,” Snape threatened, his mouth set in a hard line, almost snapping his quill in half.

“Gladly. Just make sure to send that letter.”

Harry was surprised he was not physically dragged out. Well, he’d done what he could for now, yet the thought offered little absolution to the terror gripping him.

As expected, his roommates were fast asleep by the time he returned and quietly rifled through his trunk in search of pyjamas. Harry’s fingers pricked on the edge of something sharp and he let out a small hiss. *What the* …? It was a book. A fairytale book. A muggle one with a pretty drawing and black script that had *Beauty and the Beast* innocently staring at him from the cover. Harry’s hands trembled as a smile broke onto his face. Between the first few pages a letter awaited.

Harry jumped onto his bed, shut the curtains and read the note hidden between the pages of Voldemort’s gift.

There is nothing happy about fairytales. Only one lesson from them is real. We survive in spite of all, no matter how dark our nights appear. So dark we may lose ourselves in them. But do no such thing, Harry. Survive. For me, for us, and understand you are never truly alone. Not with me.

It was not signed, not that it needed to be.

Harry held the sheet of paper to his chest, tracing his palms over Voldemort's letter. He had knew how hard it would be for Harry. The loneliness…

The Dark Lord understood.

Harry's grin spread from ear to ear. Somehow, it would be fine. Snape would alert Voldemort and the Dark Lord would know what to do. Time. Time was the real enemy. Neville must not be allowed to learn of the horcruxes and if he did… well, there was little death could not solve.

Once upon a time such a thought would never have even crossed his mind.

* * *

Slughorn was easy to deal with, and even more so with the help of Harry's brand new Potions manual complete with helpful instructions scribbled on the corners of its pages. A flask of *Liquid Luck* in his pocket, Harry followed his friends to Defence, head held high as he ignored their bickering. It was rather annoying but upon entering Snape's classroom they thankfully went quiet.

The man was already there and did not spare Harry a single glance. Had the letter even been sent? Harry should just drink from the tiny bottle filled with Felix Felicis and try to get out of Hogwarts on his own. He was sure it would be faster than anything Snape was able to deliver. *Slimy git* .

"You're coming to Hogsmeade this weekend, aren't you?" Hermione asked as they settled in.

Right. Hogsmeade. "Yeah, I guess. Why?"

Hermione furrowed her brow. "No reason. Just wanted to be sure. Luna and Neville will be there and I wanted to make sure you'd come as well. We haven't really gone out since, well — last year, so I just…. wanted us to go out," she ended in a low voice as Snape inched towards them.

Harry rolled his eyes after glancing at the man. He was already dreading this class.

His prediction came true as the joint class of Gryffindor and Slytherins stood in front of a shabby cabinet which served as home to a damn Boggart. *Again* , due to the courtesy of Snape for whatever idiotic reason. Harry glared at the man as the immortal creature rattled inside the wardrobe and narrowed his eyes when one dubious being after another materialised in front of the class. And yes, there was Ron's giant spider.

Only two people remained in front of him. A clown and a snake. How mundane. Now… now Snape watched him. Had the git done this on purpose? For what reason? Harry wasn't even sure what form his Boggart would take. Surely not a Dementor? That fear passed long ago. His classmates clearly expected that or Lord Voldemort. But his answer came to him the very same moment the snake started to shift.

“I don’t—” Harry managed to let out but it was already too late.

In front of Harry kneeled another Harry and everyone gasped. He could not look away. The familiar bowl came to the Boggart's lips and, just as the real Harry had done, it gagged at the taste as liquid spilled over its lips. Fake Harry was making a horcrux before all these people.

“What the fuck?” someone from behind screeched. “Is this a joke or something?”

There were no black shadows, no fire breathing dragons or pale vampires. Just a shivering Harry with a bloody mouth, gulping down the human flesh from the bowl he held with shaking hands. But it was so much worse. A nightmare in broad daylight and a part of him everyone was now witnessing. Whispers surrounded him, some loud and some not. Harry could not pry his eyes away as panic steadily rose and swallowed him whole when —

Voldemort’s soul caressed his heart. The locket stripped the fright from his bones and thrummed in time with his pulse. Safe, Harry was safe. *They only saw. None understood.*

Harry moved away from the scene, making space for Neville for which the false Harry remade itself into a familiar face.

Neville shrieked and all his friends held their breaths. Snape took a step back while Harry stared at the imposing figure of Voldemort dominating the classroom. Harry’s gaze traced over familiar features, over the arch of his lips and those eyes now locked on his own with a tilt of his head. Voldemort studied Harry as well — No, the *Boggart* studied him… in a manner so intimate Harry almost inched toward it. But it soon came to an end when a blonde girl from Slytherin replaced a shivering Neville. Then Voldemort melted away.

The silence was deafening. Just as the silence back in second year had been when Harry spoke Parseltongue for the first time in front of an audience. The stares were the same. A portion from fear, a portion from wonder. Almost no one feared the handsome man from before yet Harry’s Boggart had transformed into himself, gagging on something with revulsion. If Harry had not been so terrified of his secret being exposed he may have felt embarrassed. Yet no one laughed, not even the Slytherins. Not even Draco.

And Snape… Snape was the living image of determination yet his face was drained of any colour.

How could the Potions master not recognise the ritual if he saw it? Now he knew and Harry could not do or say anything to make it stop, to reverse it all .

On and on these thoughts went with no end in sight. The class was far from over but Harry made his decision. He left the study hall and did not look back. Let them wonder. Let them speak.

* * *

In the tower where Voldemort had once stood, Harry clutched the locket to his chest. *It made little difference if Snape knew* . Truly. Harry could kiss Voldemort’s feet for having the

inspiration to enslave the potions master in an Unbreakable Vow. Harry's savage act would survive as a secret. Snape could tell no one of his horcrux. All was well.

Yet the Boggart… To portray such an image in front of the other students… What had they made of it? The truth was a long reach but it was human nature to wonder.

And bloody Neville with the Dark Lord… Snape was forced to keep his secrets, but what if Neville had been so frightened of Voldemort materialising in front of his eyes that he told Dumbledore about the incident? *And be witness to how Harry gazed at the Boggart?* If the headmaster found out about the fake Voldemort, what would stop him from desiring to see the memory himself? There'll be no more hiding.

Harry's nails probed the shiny surface of the locket. *Voldemort believed in me* , he told himself. *I need to believe in me as well.*

"In your abysmal stupidity you decided on shattering your soul."

The statement spoken in Snape's icy voice made Harry crush the horcrux in his palm before hiding it in his shirt and away from curious eyes. The man must have followed him or something. He had invaded this tranquil space that was unknowingly shared only between Harry and Voldemort. Harry found himself wishing to see Snape fall until his body hit the ground below their feet. Clenching his fingers against the railing, Harry resisted the temptation.

"My business is my own," Harry replied as the Potions master came to join him staring off into the distance. His black garments swayed gently in the breeze. "I owe no explanations no matter how many questions you —"

"Grow up, Potter. The world does not revolve around you."

Harry glared. "Maybe not, but Voldemort sure does. So do not forget what the Dark Lord does to people who are far too curious for their own good."

A snort. If Snape desired to further question him on the matter of the horcrux, he decided against it.

"Your letter has been sent. In the meantime, do try and act more normal in public. Longbottom was not the only one who saw you stare at his Boggart the way you did. Learn some self discipline, Potter. Our lord would be disappointed in your performance so far."

"You know nothing," Harry said defensively against Snape's bitter words. Pushing away from the railing, he glared at the man. "The Boggart was *your* stupid idea. We already covered them in third year with Lupin so why do it again? For what reason? That's what I want to know. And don't imagine I didn't see your interest when it was my turn to face my fears," Harry exhaled, stepping toward the staircase. "You may not tell my secret, but what about the other students?"

Snape's mouth was a hard line. "Are you questioning my loyalty to the Dark Lord?"

“No. I question your good intentions regarding me.”

They shouldn’t be fighting. At least no so loudly. With no privacy ward in place, anyone curious enough could listen in… Then it would be too late for them both.

But Snape made him so angry! It was his fault the Boggart situation happened yet the git acted like Harry was speaking rubbish. The audacity! One thing was certain though… Harry needed to talk to Voldemort about Snape. Whatever the Dark Lord had in mind concerning them, it clearly wasn’t working.

The Potions master’s face was frozen in a never ending frown. “Potter,” he droned, staring him down. “When did I ever say I had any good intentions regarding you? I merely respect my oath to our lord.”

Was this a threat? Snape could do nothing to him.

“See you do just that. I’ll leave now. And next time you decide we need to hold a conversation, summon me to your office or something, don’t invade my space.”

Silence followed Harry’s departure.

* * *

The following weeks were a nightmare. Not the classes — those went perfectly fine — but the usual meetings with Neville in which the boy shared his experiences of being in Dumbledore’s office and the bizarre happenings that occurred there. If Harry had any trace of doubt left, it had been cleared. Neville had seen a young Voldemort and Harry could not help but feel a little jealous. Neville had seen Tom Riddle framing his godfather for a murder he did not commit and seen him asking something from Slughorn and being denied. Now it was Neville’s duty to retrieve the memory from the Potions professor and Harry’s head was filled with plans on how to prevent this from happening without raising any suspicions.

Now came the Hogsmeade weekend .

It appeared Dumbledore was still too paranoid that Voldemort would kidnap Harry from the village filled with Hogwarts students, even from a candy shop. So paranoid, in fact, that he had appointed two Aurors — Mad-Eye Moody and another nameless fellow — to follow him and his friends around during their visit to the village. Watching, always watching, for a sign of stranger danger.

“These guys and their staring are creeping me out,” Ron complained around his glass of butterbeer in *The Three Broomsticks* . “Especially Moody. He keeps glancing at the door as if expecting You-Know-Who to come in and order a drink.”

The redhead laughed but Harry did not find the joke tasteful.

Apparently neither did Hermione. “Ron, they’re here for Harry’s safety. We can’t know what the Death Eaters may be up to… after all, *he’s* been awfully quiet since the Ministry…”

Ron shrugged while Ginny nodded at Hermione’s words.

“Still creepy.”

It was not creepy, it was damn infuriating. *Aurors* . One was watching the door while the other watched Harry. He was spending time with his friends, talking and such, moving from one place to another with Aurors trailing behind him like faithful little dogs. *And everyone stared* . Harry hated it. For one day, could he not be left to be someone other than the Boy Who Lived? Someone who could do as he liked without people following his every move? Anyone who was not as bound as he was.

The last straw transpired when Harry made to leave his friends’ table and the younger of the two Aurors materialised behind him demanding explanations. Well, this was not going to go their way.

Harry scowled at the man, not bothering to hide his distaste. “Ok. You basically sit here and watch me drink butterbeer with your wands ready as if You-Know-Who will come bursting through that door at any moment,” he let out, repeating Ron’s previous words. “And honestly? Even if he did, you two will be no match for him.”

The man paled. “Mister Potter, with all due respect, I hardly think this is —”

“Whatever.”

“Mister Potter,” the Auror stressed. “Where are you—?”

“Bathroom,” Harry interrupted for the second time. “Has Dumbledore ordered you to accompany me there as well?” He did not bother to wait for an answer and took his leave, catching sight of the worried face of Hermione as he did so.

Thankfully, his boring destination was deserted.

Harry sighed and leaned against the sink while breathing through his nose. He desperately needed to calm down before he did something stupid. Traitorous tears prickled in his eyes and Harry drew them away with the back of his palm. *He would not cry.* He would no show weakness with any of them. He, who had split his soul and was close enough to immortality that he could smell it… *He would not cry* .

But Harry wished to leave so badly it hurt.

Dumbledore distrusted him, Snape was not the ally he was supposed to be, and going to bloody Malfoy for help did not qualify as an alternative. Harry did not want to disappoint. He was not weak.

Just… it would be fine. Somehow. None of these men wished him any harm… They were here under strict orders; to watch over Harry.

And Dumbledore… well, considering Harry was not dead or lying locked in an obscure cell at Azkaban or worse, he supposed the headmaster did not know for sure of Harry’s shift in alliances. *At least for now* .

Yet it had all happened so fast. What if Slughorn offered Neville that memory before Harry was able to come up with a good plan? And the locket… now the other boy knew it had belonged to Tom Riddle's mother. *He knew how it looked* . On the off chance he saw the horcrux around Harry's neck…. Yes, it was risky carrying it around all the time but leaving it around in the dorm was out of the question. Harry had to do with the lesser evil.

He only wished he knew all the variables involved. Things would be easier, safer. The outcome would be clear. But he possessed no such insight, and dearly hoped Voldemort did.

The man's soul hummed against his chest and Harry's fingers smoothed over the precious object possessing a heartbeat. "I'll manage. I just need… time," he whispered for its ears only.

Was it the truth or a lie?

Harry briefly considered washing his hands just to have something to do when a figure clad in black appeared in the mirror behind him. Had the Aurors had enough of waiting?

"I'm done," Harry announced, cursing himself for speaking aloud to the horcrux earlier. How much had the man overheard?

"And I'm afraid we've only begun."

Harry would recognise that steely voice anywhere.

Voldemort watched him with barely-concealed amusement as Harry strode away from the door. It was a parody of a meeting; mighty Voldemort in this bland bathroom with white walls, white ceiling, and white everywhere. Perhaps it was a dream? Everything was happening all at once, and too good to be true. Yet Voldemort's steps echoed as he neared.

It's real , Harry decided.

Two shattered souls resided in the same place and Harry felt hope and joy invading his very being while he willed himself not to jump the Dark Lord. But the privilege of choosing was taken by Voldemort whose arms parted in an irresistible invitation, a daring smirk on his face.

Definitely real .

A small gasp escaped Harry's lips once he was enveloped in Voldemort's embrace, in steady hands that dug into his hips while the warm body pressed against his own. *Safe, warm, home.* And perfectly content with staying there forever. Harry certainly wouldn't mind. His forehead rested on the Dark Lord's shoulder, the man's wavy curls tickling his cheeks. Feeling brave, Harry's fingers trailed their way over sharp cheekbones before settling into hair black as night and gently massaging Voldemort's scalp. A deep, pleased hum echoed through his chest as the older man held him tight. It felt like a promise.

And all the while the handsome and majestic Voldemort hugged Harry like his life depended on it.

“Wha—what are you doing here?” Harry raved, still in the Dark Lord’s arms. “Aurors sent by Dumbledore are outside waiting for you and—”

“Hush, my soul. We are safe. As to why I am here… you called for me, so I came.”

The letter.

Harry’s hands wrapped around Voldemort’s neck and inhaled the familiar scent. This presence, this heartbeat against his own, all three of them… *Three* . Three, not two. He had been so bewitched by Voldemort’s sudden appearance that the horcrux had slipped his mind. This tiny scrap of Lord Voldemort did not wish to be ignored.

Quite unwillingly, Harry separated from those arms to stare up at Voldemort, tugging the golden locket out from his shirt. He was not frightened of the Dark Lord’s silence yet the anticipation remained suffocating. The unnatural paleness of Voldemort’s cheeks was the only sign of his disbelief, or dare he say… shock? Hands picked the horcrux from Harry’s outstretched hand. Gently, and with slow movements as if afraid the locket may fade away. Those grey eyes did not let go of Harry even for a moment and finally, when he had the horcrux in his palm, Voldemort straightened further to become even more imposing. Just like when you offered wood to a raging fire.

Harry was mesmerised.

“How?” Came the expected question.

Harry told Voldemort everything except the incident with Neville's Boggart. *That secret Harry would prefer to keep to himself* . The man listened to the story with sharp eyes, any warmth from their previous exchange shadowed by an icy purpose.

“You said Dumbledore’s hand appeared dead?” the Dark Lord asked, ignoring how said man apparently knew about his horcruxes and was training bloody Neville to destroy them.

Harry nodded, stealing a look at the door. How much time had passed? How long until questions would arise? Until Moody or the other Auror arrived to investigate? “Yeah. He offered no explanation, but Snape helped him with it so—”

“Severus had told the truth.”

The horcrux was safely tucked in his pocket by now.

“You knew?” Harry asked.

“Yes, my soul. I know many things, even the reason why Dumbledore is dying as we speak.” Voldemort invaded Harry’s space, eyes blazing. “The ring you were promised was protected by tricky little curses placed by none other than myself. It may have been destroyed but Dumbledore has paid the price. Death will not touch me. Him, however… In a few months the great Albus Dumbledore will be no more.” Fingers reached out and tapped Harry’s chin almost playfully. “Then again, our wheel is spinning faster than expected. Disposing of him

may require action sooner rather than later. And you wish to leave this place, or am I mistaken?"

"Are you ever? Yes, I wanna leave but the diadem is still hidden in the castle. After I retrieve it… I suppose I can see to it then. But what Dumbledore is doing… showing Neville memories about your past… it's not right. He showed him your parents, the evening when you killed your father, Slughorn's visit, and who knows what else…"

Harry eyed Voldemort's face as he spoke, observing the pensiveness, the calmness. *Was it the the truth? Or a lie?*

"Aren't you going to ask me why I did it?" Voldemort demanded, tugging Harry closer by his chin. "Murder the vermin whose blood I shared?"

"Daddy issues?"

Voldemort actually smirked. "You are not wrong. That man left my pregnant mother to die after she tricked him with a love potion. It is safe to say he was not happy when his son came to visit." Grey eyes gleamed even in the whiteness of the bathroom and made the noises from outside sound faint. A whole other world out there and Harry could only focus on the man in front of him. "Family issues, more like it. Now it matters not. I am here, they are not."

The hand at Harry's chin became claws. It stung as Voldemort stared down at him, his presence almost... *tense* as Harry sensed it through their link. Next thing he knew, the handsome man before him furrowed his brow and leaned down, breathing right into Harry's space. Their lips were so close, the air heavy, and this was real. Not an elaborate dream of Harry's. *Voldemort was close enough to kiss* . Such intensity in those grey eyes, pinning Harry to the spot without the help of any spell. His hand and gaze were enough.

A prolonged silence settled. After a few more moments of intense staring and those fingers on Harry's chin, Voldemort spoke.

"You desire me."

Hope, terror, and a few others too — emotions, far more than he could name — glowed inside of Harry for Voldemort to see.

"I—I do. I did and I—I do still want you," Harry said quietly.

Grey eyes flashed and a look of pure *want* crossed over Voldemort's face. The same kind he had worn when staring at the locket. And the Dark Lord still desired to talk. "Have you forgotten who am I, my precious soul? What I made you do?" Amusement poured from his voice.

"No," Harry responded. "But my crush just won't seem to go away. So here we are."

Harry sounded braver than he felt. When Voldemort's nails bit further into his skin, Harry was as ready as possible.

The Dark Lord's lips covered his, fingers tilting Harry's head in all the right places, granting Voldemort full access to his mouth. Calling this mere kissing would do the act no justice. Soul sharing was more like it. This state of utter completeness and fiery want, all at the same time… as if they were the closest they could ever be, but never close enough. Their desire was far greater.

And the way Voldemort kissed… like he was tasting more than Harry's saliva and wanting to do more than just touch lips. It felt like a prelude to a momentous act… Like killing, devouring — Or pinning Harry to the bathroom mirrors and doing as he pleased with him.

When the older man scooped Harry into his powerful arms and placed him on the bathroom counter, Harry's fingers latched onto the soft hair by instinct, smothering it under his palms. Voldemort pressed into him with his height and shoulders, a frantic desperation in his movements. *This was really happening.* They were sharing touches in a shady place where anyone could enter. Including those Aurors set on monitoring Harry. Paradoxically, it was kind of awfully satisfying. As they watched out for the Dark Lord, the Dark Lord ravished Harry not even twenty steps from them. *Such a wicked fairy tale indeed.*

Recalling those stories… Had the princess ever spread her legs like Harry now did?

"My Harry. Be a good boy and open those legs for your lord. For your very soul," Voldemort urged against Harry's lips, punctuating every word with an aching nip, as if reading Harry's mind…

The Dark Lord's voice ran through his veins like fire. The groan that escaped Voldemort's mouth was one of the sweetest sounds Harry had ever heard. He pulled at the man's hair and kissed him, opening his mouth for Voldemort's tongue. He made Harry feel both small and protected. He gasped when the man's obvious arousal pressed against his own and Voldemort actually growled, biting down on Harry's earlobe.

Harry shuddered in the firm hold and Voldemort stilled, heavy breaths fanning against his neck.

"Why did you—"

"I want you on your knees, I want to fuck your pretty mouth," the man hissed, now staring down at Harry and breathing heavily. "But the charm I placed on the door informs me that someone is heading this way. One of the Aurors, most likely."

Harry dumbly nodded, stubborn fingers not leaving Voldemort's hair. *He did not want this to end* ! What Voldemort had said —

Though a soft look was directed at him, Voldemort evoked smugness as his hands eased their hold on either side of Harry's face. "I must go, my soul. But as soon as you retrieve my horcrux, tell Severus to write a letter. Then I'll come for you, everything will end, and it'll be just the two of us. I promise."

Harry closed his eyes in acceptance. *In defeat.* "I know you will," he mumbled.

Warm lips covered Harry's forehead, right above his scar. "Do not pout, my soul. Trust in my promises, both of them. We'll be together and I'll be in this pretty mouth of yours." Eyes bore into him with mirth. "See you soon, my joy."

"I thought I was your soul," teased Harry, sensing the impending farewell.

"That too. And many others."

The smile they shared felt like another secret. He made to say his goodbyes but Voldemort had Disapparated right before Moody burst into the bathroom, scrutinising Harry from head to toe and searching for any sign of danger.

"Potter… what in the world are you doing perched next to the sink?"

The Auror actually waited for an answer.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

beta by the amazing Vanillaghost

Lord Voldemort summoned his followers in the dead of night. Severus' chest did a particular clenching motion he now associated with dismay before deserting his chambers, not bothering to inform Dumbledore of his whereabouts. The sudden disappearance would do that just fine being as it was routine by now.

At the edge of the grounds he reached the end of the wards and Apparated to where Voldemort's presence called to him. Not unlike the last two meetings, Severus found himself at Malfoy Manor. It was familiar territory, he thought, as he passed the towering iron gates reminiscent of Hogwarts and went straight inside the mansion. He climbed the tall staircase and arrived at the double doors which led to the meeting chamber where Severus threaded inside. As always, he was the last to arrive.

From the head of the dining room table Lord Voldemort's cold eyes found his. There was nothing to be read in them. Only after glancing away did Severus notice the new company — a young man whose body floated above the table, an injured man he recognised at once. It was the Auror who accompanied Potter to Hogsmeade; Moody's partner, the half-blood named Gawain Robards working under Rufus Scrimgeour. *What was he here for?* Severus' expression remained unchanged as he took the only vacant space across from Narcissa, two seats away from the Dark Lord and his commanding presence.

The white wand was being played with. That alone raised questions. Voldemort appeared to be in a viciously good mood.

"Dumbledore?"

The usual paranoia stretched its claws within Severus. "Dying as we speak, my Lord. Otherwise, he appears to have replaced Potter with Longbottom. They gather in his office during weekends, presumably for training."

Several laughs stirred the silence, Bellatrix's the loudest of them all. The sound seemed to have awakened Robards from whatever slumber he had been immersed in as the man thrashed in invisible restraints with no voice to call for help.

"Ohhh… has little Potter lost his value so soon?" Narcissa's sister raved. "To be replaced with a useless grandma's boy?" She cackled again, only this time she was the only one to do so. Bellatrix's voice died down as she looked at Lord Voldemort.

Narrowed eyes met her gaze. Silence and tension fell, the only moving thing in the room being miserable Robards and his miserable fate. Most did not even understand what had transpired, but Severus had.

The Dark Lord was infuriated by Bellatrix's careless remark concerning Potter. Severus could not help but wonder *why*, but then remembered Voldemort's obsession with the boy. *Find Potter and bring him to me. Find him, find him, find him.* He remembered them in his home one rainy morning, sharing secrets. If Bellatrix had continued to laugh, she may as well have joined the Auror. Both floating. Both soon to be dead.

"Severus… you are acquainted with our guest. Am I wrong?"

Bellatrix appeared to get away with the insult this one time.

A response was expected from his part. Words couldn't convey how dearly he wished to be left in peace… Of all the humans and beasts Severus had the misfortune of encountering during his life, Lord Voldemort was by far the most terrible. The most *loathsome*. The handsome face offered no assistance, nothing did. Eyes of a predator, he possessed, and the mouth of one too. *All the better to tear you apart with*, a voice supplied. *Leisurely*.

"You are right, my Lord. Gawain Robards. Auror."

"Auror," repeated Voldemort with both glee and repugnance. "Another ant waiting to be crushed. Bellatrix, do you know what guilt this particular ant has?"

The woman visibly tensed, sensing the trap by being directly addressed while Severus had an inkling on where this was going. Lucius' snowy brows were furrowed, obviously confused by the question.

"He… he's a filthy half-blood?" she tried in raspy voice.

Merlin… if Bellatrix did not cease talking…

"No, Bella. Guess again."

"He - he's a filth lover, a mudblo—"

"No, Bella. *Again*," dictated the Dark Lord with cold grey eyes.

At last the black-haired woman did the smart thing and bent her head low before any more words left her lips. "I apologise, my Lord. I… I do not know."

Voldemort appeared to be waiting for this flawed opportunity. "I'll enlighten you then," he said, and shoved back his seat before stalking around the table with slow, deliberate movements. Movements meant to strike fear and that had everyone on edge. "It appears you, as many of my other followers, have made a grave mistake. What is it, you may wonder? I ask you… do the words of your Lord hold such little importance to you?"

Heads turned at the question yet silence reigned.

“I am profoundly saddened. What have I told you regarding Harry Potter? About the boy you mocked in my presence? He’s mine, every inch of him, from his toes to every strand of hair — fine hair, he has, like silk through my fingers — *Mine*. So I tell you… all that belongs to Lord Voldemort is precious, holy, sanctified. Harry Potter above all. And yet you direct your spiteful words at my boy —” Sharp eyes turned on Bella. “And you attempt to spoil our reunion.” The gaze moved to the Auror. “Never again.”

Reunion. That meant the Dark Lord had set foot in Hogsmeade and Potter had met with him. Because of the letter Severus sent. In truth, he had not spared a moment to think Voldemort would actually arrange a meeting at the whim of the boy. Yet the monster had. Because Potter asked him to. *Power* was the word that came to mind. An interesting new development. But the unfortunate encounter also meant the Dark Lord was aware of Severus’ knowledge of the existence of Potter’s horcrux. No matter though, the Unbreakable Vow would suffice. If it ever came to explaining the fiasco with the boggart, well, deception was second nature to Severus after all these years.

He was dragged out of his musings by a loud ‘*thud*’. The hands Severus rested on the table recoiled when the thrashing form of the Auror fell. The spell suspending his body in the air had ceased… and Robards would soon meet his demise.

“No one touches Harry Potter but me,” the horror of a man hissed. “This is the final warning I offer. Otherwise, keep your eyes open wide to witness the… *punishment*.”

The silencing charm dropped. Yet there was no immediate torture, only the stretched form of a silent Nagini slithering onto the dining table. Then a whisper in Parseltongue from Voldemort and the enormous snake bared her jaws in which death awaited. Then she struck. Many flinched and paled yet none dared to look away as Nagini swallowed Robards whole, starting from his feet. Wild shrieks echoed in every corner of the chamber as if amplified by magic.

Punishment indeed.

Lord Voldemort looked victorious supervising the carnage. The image of which did not vanish when Severus next blinked.

* * *

Whenever Harry’s fingers used to seek the locket, they now travelled to his lips. Both had known Lord Voldemort. Because *Voldemort had kissed him!* He had trapped Harry in his arms and made him feel the fiery want hiding beneath the Dark Lord’s skin. This… this was no elaborate dream. This was real. Harry’s fingers stubbornly nuzzled at his lips. The memory came and went, lingering at the corners of his mind and making him lose himself to childish happiness. It was the most he had felt since the creation of his horcrux. Even Ron had commented on his suspiciously good mood during breakfast.

“Mate… no one has the right to be this happy so early in the morning. If Snape had broke his neck going down the Grand Staircase I'd totally understand, but he’s still sitting at the professors’ table so…”

Hermione and Ginny were also looking at him with curiosity, ignoring Ron’s amusing exemplification.

“Erich sent me a letter. I’ll be spending Christmas with him,” Harry announced with unmasked pride.

Snape had delivered the invitation with his trademark sneer. Well… not exactly an invitation, more like a proclamation. Harry had been informed he was to return to the Dark Lord’s home during the winter holidays and it sat extremely well with him. Harry didn’t want to waste any more time. He wanted Voldemort, he wanted adventure, he wanted kisses exchanged in their library, lips pressed against skin and the Dark Lord’s eyes on him. He wanted their talks and even the sometimes cruel taunts of the man. Harry craved it all. Not school.

“You’re not going back to Sirius?” Hermione questioned with disapproving eyes.

“Well… no… Me and Erich have plans.”

Voldemort always had some kind of plan.

Meanwhile Harry’s own concerns remained, of the diadem and Neville. At least the new bloody Chosen One had only met failure in his quest to obtain Slughorn’s precious memory. But it offered little comfort. It was a race against time. Even if the Potions professor continued to decline giving it up, Dumbledore would eventually act. The stakes were too high not to. And then… Then what? Nothing was clear. Harry didn’t know what was in the memory but going by Voldemort’s reaction from their encounter in the bathroom it was anything but good.

And then there was the diadem… retrieving it would be best done right before Christmas. The day of the departure, if possible. Dealing with the golden locket had been easier because it was a locket; Harry was able to wear it underneath his school robes. Always with him, always safe. But the diadem… he couldn't exactly stroll around Hogwarts with it on his head! And leaving it in the dorms was out of question. Its magic pulsed and it wouldn’t be long before curiosity stirred and people would look.

Harry huffed in annoyance. If only the old professor would run away from Hogwarts. But there was a slim chance of that actually happening. But maybe… maybe if Slughorn were to die…

Harry’s fingers clenched around the goblet in his hands, eyes darting to the High Table. The professor was laughing, not a care in the world. If he were to disappear no one would see the memory. Dumbledore might suspect something but would not know just how many of Voldemort’s horcruxes there were. And Neville… the so-called Chosen One would be even more clueless. He would not know what to do with the little information offered by the headmaster in a desperate attempt to destroy the Dark Lord and Harry. Darkness would make

itself a home in their hearts. They would fear. How could they not? Blindly battling a ruthless enemy that would only lead them to their death.

But kill Slughorn?

Could Harry cast the curse again? Destroy an innocent man's life?

Innocent. A laugh bubbled up in Harry's throat. Was anyone truly innocent? Did it make any difference? Life was a fight. One against the rest, he and Voldemort against the world. What wouldn't the Dark Lord do to protect them? The answer would be the same for Harry. Because, in the end, what good had others done for him? Voldemort was the only exception.

Yes, Harry *could* kill Slughorn. It had a higher purpose, and was not some meaningless killing like other monsters committed. Harry was better than that.

Chatter buzzed around him and Harry gazed away from the professor to stare down at his hands. No trembling, no reaction whatsoever. Before the horcrux, he had no idea he could be capable of such things. That he would one day value his life so immensely that he was able to eat breakfast while planning a murder. Among other things.

Things about a tall man with a cruel expression that thrilled Harry only by looking at him.

Harry… Harry had changed. People had years and years in which to grow and learn to live with themselves. Just like bones grow back and stick together over time. Some broke only to soon be mended. But Harry… Harry had been unmade down to his very soul and then some… He was transformed. Different. *Above*. How could any of these children ever understand? How could they comprehend of a pain so fierce that it washed one away completely? Pressing you to the bottom of your conscience with rocks until even your name faded? Only then to survive, to open your eyes and live! Who else could have endured all this and then stand on shaking legs and walk on? No one. Absolutely no one.

No one knew what real pain felt like. But he and Voldemort did. And Harry was here to —

"Harry!"

Hermione was shouting. Her eyes were round and pinned on him, but not just hers; all occupants of the Grand Hall were watching him. But why? Oh… they were not only peering at him. Harry's gaze moved past the the goblet before his eyes to where parts of it lay shattered, pumpkin juice staining the table and Harry's joined hands. The result of an outburst of magic.

They all watched. The students, Slughorn, Snape, Dumbledore.

"It happens," Harry smiled at his friends and mended the broken parts with a flick of his wrist. "My thoughts must have been on Voldemort."

His grin was not returned.

* * *

Despite what whispers and people's fantasies said, Albus Dumbledore found no pleasure in being bowed to, nor in being the subject of barely concealed awe. It was not in his nature. But he had learned long ago that people were not easily swayed. Let them watch, they did no harm. Least of all to him.

As it was, his presence at Gringotts did not go unnoticed that day around noon when countless eyes glued themselves to the back of his head as he was escorted to the Head Goblin's office. They were gazes full of either admiration or resentment, but nothing in between. It was love or hate. He had no choice but to accept them both.

Only the goblins were different. There was no interest whatsoever on their part for Albus. No more than any other client and what they had stored in their pockets.

"Mister Dumbledore," the goblin called upon his entrance and did not waste time in questioning the purpose of his visit. "We considered your request but no matter the consequences you invoked on our society, I am afraid Madame Black's vault will open to no one but her. Rules are very clear and we have a reputation to live up to. The answer remains a 'no'."

Albus held back a sigh. He had, of course, foreseen this outcome. Yet a private meeting with the Head Goblin was what he had truly aimed for. All important business was decided in such circumstances and this may as well be the most crucial business conducted in history.

"I do understand and respect your policy," Albus added with a nod. "But in that vault there is an object that holds the key to Lord Voldemort's destruction. I do not ask to enter the vault. Not even to take the object with me. Merely to have a few minutes with it, in your very presence, will suffice. And your assistance will never be forgotten."

Pearl black eyes blinked and veiny hands joined above the white parchment.

"It appears we are caught in an error of communication that needs dire fixing. Allow me to do just that. Who wins this petty war is of little importance to us. Whether it be you or the Dark Lord… *both* are in need of our services. And will continue to be. You see… gold has no morals. And my kin and I will have no part in this affair. We simply… watch and wait for the fuss to pass. Now, please, place yourself in my considerably smaller shoes. If the Dark Lord were to win, what do you think he would do to those who conspired in his destruction?"

"If you bring me the cup, he'll never live long enough to seek vengeance."

"So you say. But words remain words. You may speak truth or you may not… it's of little interest to me. And you forget the most crucial part; our policy is the same for all our clients. Whether they have stolen, killed, or raped outside these walls is not of our concern. Only their gold is. Now, if that is all… another meeting is to follow and my day is already packed."

True to his word, Albus admired their dedication and work ethic. Nonetheless, he resented it. His task would have been easier. *Neville's* task would have been easier. Now the boy had another horcrux among who-knew-how-many others to seek and destroy. And Horace still would not reveal the memory.

The situation continued to spiral *down, down, down* and every time Albus hoped for better, another surprise was in store. He knew Horace would never disclose his secrets to him but Neville should have earned his trust by now. Yet he came and went with the same answer of '*No'* every time and a distant part of Albus knew the other boy would have already succeeded by now.

Harry.

If only he could be trusted. How deep the boy was involved in all this remained a mystery yet Albus had no doubt he had a bond with Tom. There were far too many coincidences for there not to be one. From his disappearance at the Ministry and then the Dursleys, to the mysterious lover, Severus' enigmatic words, the existence of the vow, and then the white fog shielding Harry's thoughts from him. *All the lying*. And, of course, Harry's brilliant eyes that no longer had frames to cover their green hue. Yes, Tom had sunken his claws deep inside the boy. Albus had been aware of it the moment he arrived for the meeting at Sirius' place. It saddened him, to see something so pure torn to shreds. Now when Harry gazed into his eyes, he lied without shame.

And Albus was hopeless to do anything as he stood in this tidy office. Hopeless to do anything but stand there.

"Is there nothing I can do to convince you otherwise? Nothing to bargain on?"

"No, Mister Dumbledore. Have a good day."

Well, there were other ways. Even Gringotts had a weakness. Someone with the necessary skills and a daring spirit could do the deed. Most assuredly it was difficult, but not impossible.

"Good day to you as well."

Albus had not yet reached the door when the next client made his grand entrance. With no questions asked, no knocking, and apparently no manners.

Then he saw that it was Tom Riddle, dressed all in black with a smirk painted on his face with no surprise to be written there either. Only maliciousness. Mockingly, Lord Voldemort advanced. "Dumbledore," came his voice, far colder than Dumbledore remembered as Voldemort's eyes swum with cruelty. "I'd say this meeting was a pleasure but, then again, there is no use in deceiving worthless individuals."

"Tom. Imperious as ever, I see. And age has not made you any wiser."

The Head Goblin watched them as they watched each other.

Wearing Tom Riddle's face, Lord Voldemort inched closer until he was towering over Dumbledore. With relaxed shoulders, chin held high, and hair black as night pushed back from his symmetrical face. Only the sharp set of his mouth offered any clue to his reaction on Albus' remark and ah, the pride had doubled. The fall as well.

"And you're still squirming around in your petty existence. But Dumbledore… hold no worry in your eyes. I did not come here to duel you, nor am I on a killing spree. Important business demanded my immediate attention." Attention which Tom then heavily settled on the Head Goblin. "Thank you for the loyalty of your services." The goblin nodded at the Dark Lord. "You'll find Bellatrix Lestrange waiting in front of her vault. One precious possession is to be retrieved."

Down down down it went. Albus sighed, the fingers of his healthy hand ached for his wand, for the chance to put an end to this madness. But it was a foolish thought. Both Tom and the goblin were looking at him.

"No one will draw their wands here. Because if you do…"

"We may never set foot in here again," supplied his former student, ever so keen to offer his help. "I know."

"Precisely," approved the Head Goblin before taking his leave from the office, leaving the two wizards waiting in silence.

Once the door closed Tom wandlessly enlarged the goblin's chair before planting himself on it. Such a vain boy.

Albus joined him and, as expected, he wasn't the first to speak. Many things had changed since he last glimpsed Lord Voldemort yet it seemed the man's enjoyment at hearing his own voice prevailed.

"Mighty Albus Dumbledore, willing to dirty his hands and break the law… to steal another's treasure." A childish smirk played on his lips. "The tragedy of it all is how no one would believe me. Such a shame. And oh…. how much pleasure I find in saying *I told you so*."

Tom was in high spirits. Why wouldn't he be? Harry was under his influence, the odds were in his favour in this war, and one of his who-knew-how-many horcruxes was only a few breaths away from him. Albus had to smile too, albeit grimly.

"How does it feel?" asked Tom, almost softly. "To know all your efforts are futile? That I will win and no one can see the end of it. Not even you, Dumbledore."

"You are right, Tom. We really matter not in the great scheme of things, not compared to you. And yet… once again, in spite of your brilliancy, you fail to understand something; we are many and you are not. On our own, we are powerless. But together we are able to accomplish even the most unbelievable of things. Even against the mighty Dark Lord who fancies himself invincible."

A sneer formed at the mention of his given name. “Oh, none shall be stopped from trying. Beasts must be punished before they learn how to behave and, as a merciful Lord, I shall oblige. But remember this, Dumbledore. My power is no illusion.”

“I never suggested it was. After all, you wouldn’t have come this far if it was. Young Harry would have never bared his neck for you.”

The smirk faded and Tom’s face became a blank canvas so that one could not determine his thoughts from one or another. Was he frightened? Or did he care not that Albus knew of Harry’s alliances? The familiar face displayed nothing and it might as well say everything. Yet Lord Voldemort had ceased his talking for a moment.

“Harry Potter,” Tom finally spoke the name. “Has the boy lost his value to you so soon?”

It did not escape Albus’ notice how the Dark Lord danced around the subject. His horcrux indeed.

“It had not. But he is the one who is lost.”

“He has me,” Tom taunted. “Harry Potter is mine.”

“And you are his, I suppose?” Albus added, amused, dangling the bait. “Do you really expect me to believe your supposed commitment?”

Voldemort took it, spitting it out one moment later; “Do not presume to know everything about us. Me and Harry. Harry and I. We belong to each other. Your silly notions matter not,” he boasted with pride. “No mind could ever understand. No one but us.”

Something inside Albus’ mind clicked. The words ‘*we belong to each other’* coming from the mouth of Lord Voldemort himself. *Us*, not *me*. The tune had changed and the dance followed. Tom had gifted him what he wanted without realising. And Severus’ expression, the existence of the Unbreakable Vow in order to keep his silence… it all settled into place. At first, Albus had believed the deadly promise happened in order to keep the spy’s silence on Harry's alliance. How foolish — Tom would never bind himself over something so little. No, the stakes were much higher. *Us, us, us*. Not one person but two. What could be so important for Lord Voldemort to directly involve himself? Harry… something about Harry, yet different from the horcrux.

Horcrux.

Tom was consumed with his immortality. Yet the human horcrux anchoring him to this world reeked of mortality. Of death. Of failure. Surely he had not made Harry do —

Revulsion shook Albus’ body so that he fought for his expression to remain still. A light of understanding descended upon his thoughts. How much Harry had changed, how little he ate, how he seemed only to tolerate his friends’ presence… how ancient he appeared as he stared off into the distance. How there was now nothing where once everything had been. Albus blinked at Tom, bile in his throat. This man… this man was truly a monster beyond salvation. To destroy little Harry this way… He could forgive Tom of many crimes but not of this one.

Harry, the little bundle in his arms, the child with those green eyes full of kindness and courage… now hollow. Now a murderer.

And Tom… Tom, who possessed this special ability of tainting everything he touched, was suddenly smiling as he stood. As if sensing something. Bellatrix must have retrieved his horcrux.

Gleaming eyes found his. “Take good care of your Chosen One, Dumbledore. Even better, hide and not waste any more lives. Next time there will be no more refusals to your requests… yet feel free to try and pay the price. That is what you get when you stick your *hands* into other people’s business. Good day.”

Albus’ greyish hand throbbed as Tom deserted the office without looking back. Let him have his insults and his smugness. Albus had something infinitely more precious. Knowledge.

* * *

Half a day until Voldemort returned.

Snow fell from the sky cladding the grounds in white. Christmas was around the corner and all children sheltered by the grand castle were buzzing with excitement to finally return home. To their loved ones, to all things familiar, to warm arms and quiet days. With exams over, the corridors of Hogwarts were swimming with people darting from one place or the other, settling unfinished business before they left for the next few weeks. School work, bidding goodbyes to their friends or simply enjoying the last few hours under Hogwarts’ roof.

Only Harry was not enjoying his surroundings or visiting housemates and the like. Instead he paced two of the three times before the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy when none other than Dumbledore made his appearance from around the corner. Harry froze, eyes wide, heart in his throat, nothing but a wall separating Voldemort’s precious soul from his hands. The crimson robes of the headmaster swiped across the floor, collecting dust and Harry's curses. *Damn him, damn him, damn him!*

“Good morning, sir.”

“Good morning Harry. What a pleasant coincidence. I was just thinking on meeting you yet it appears fate favours this old man. My boy, walk with me.”

Harry was fuming as he trailed alongside Dumbledore, every step carrying him away from Voldemort’s soul while his own ached.

“Is there something wrong?” he wondered.

"Nothing more than the usual,” the headmaster responded. “Harry… will you heed my advice once again? This Christmas… go to Sirius. Go to your family.”

How Dumbledore knew of his plans to run away with his supposed lover was beyond Harry.

“I’m sorry, sir. Me and Erich have plans.”

Silence reigned between them as Harry realised the old man was escorting him back to Gryffindor Tower. The curious eyes of the students followed them, overanalysing everything. Harry had to fight to keep a pleasant expression on his face. *Damn him, damn him, damn him!* Time kept passing along with his chance to rescue Voldemort’s soul. And Dumbledore was still talking!

“Shame, Harry. Shame. But I won’t insist as your decision is already made.”

No amount of sadness in his voice could make Harry feel bad for him. He cared not for Dumbledore’s whims and his unnatural desire to know everything about Harry. Who he was with, where he was, and even what he ate. Harry didn't give a shit. Only his plan mattered — one that was now all ruined. Voldemort had counted on him and Harry… Harry had royally disappointed.

“Off you go, by boy,” Dumbledore said once at the entrance of the Gryffindor common room. “You wouldn’t want to miss the train.”

“Of course, sir. Happy Holidays.”

“Happy Holidays to you as well, Harry. Take care of yourself.”

Harry would have run back to the tapestry but Dumbledore remained in his spot outside the common room with a twinkle in his eyes until Harry entered. The possibility of the old man lingering nearby and the passing of time were both against him. He could not return for the diadem. Harry was tangled up in misery, glaring at one unfortunate first year who happened to bump into him on his way to the boys’ dormitories.

“Move,” he ordered.

Nothing was going well. Nothing!

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

beta by the amazing Vanillaghost

In Harry's eyes there was not another soul besides Voldemort waiting on the platform. The man's head was slightly tilted, cocky smile curving his lips, amused as Harry drew near. Unreal, but no dream. No elaborate fabrication of Harry's mind. *Voldemort was truly here.*

A hand was offered and all at once the familiar setting of the Dark Lord's library replaced King's Cross station as they Apparated. Quiet conquered the noise and Harry's school trunk went down as he went up. Voldemort had swiped Harry off the ground, twirling the boy in his arms. A habit was being established, one of the most pleasant kind. Like this, Harry was home again and the burdens on his chest lost their previous weight. They melted away as Harry laughed while being spun around and around. It was intimate, the touch glorious and quite close to happiness.

"We're so close to winning," Voldemort murmured, half reading his mind as he placed Harry down and captured his already parted lips with his own. So tender the man's kisses were, as if Harry may break in his very arms. So different from the time in the bathroom when all seemed to be gloom and helplessness. When they had no time. But now, fingers cradled through messy hair at the base of his skull, both petting and keeping him in place. Voldemort wanted more… Harry wanted more but…

He pulled himself back and Voldemort growled, tugging Harry back to his chest.

"I messed up," Harry breathlessly confessed into the crook of the man's neck.

The grip on his body tightened for a fraction of a moment and everything stilled. Would there be punishment? Words? Harry tensed as he swept over the grim possibilities yet Voldemort only interlocked their fingers and marched them to the cushion where they sat.

"Tell me."

The steely voice promised danger but Harry met the other's eyes and spoke. Voldemort listened with tight lips, fingers almost crushing Harry's own. Smothering touches followed atop his hand as if apologising for the harm done. But the coldness in his gaze lingered. Then it was Harry's turn to hear Voldemort's story.

"I'm so sorry," Harry let out after the prolonged silence and stares. "I should have —"

"Should have? Perhaps. But in the end you could have done nothing." In spite of his words Voldemort *was* infuriated, his posture stiff, and no amount of kind words would make any

difference. “So the old fool knows… I only wonder why he let you go, fully aware that you’d come back to me.”

“He’s scheming,” Harry sighed now that he was away from the danger, and leaned back to turn his in Voldemort’s direction. “You had Bellatrix going for your horcrux right under his nose. He must be getting truly desperate. And now Dumbledore has enough information to place me in some kind of arrest but he does nothing… It makes no sense.”

“Not to us.” Voldemort tugged him back to his feet. “I’ll say it only once so listen carefully as I refuse to hear any apologies. The fault lies in Dumbledore and Dumbledore only. The diadem has waited for years. It can wait some more. After you return to Hogwarts you will take it and leave the castle. In the morning, after class, in the dark of night… I could not care less. As simple as that.” A long finger trailed over Harry’s cheek, charming a smile onto his lips. “Now, I hope the journey was pleasant enough. There is no time for reminiscing. We have to pay a visit to a common acquaintance.”

“Again?”

The memory of what followed after visiting Snape’s home brought a shiver down his spine.

“I believe you’ll enjoy this one, my soul.”

Harry chose to trust that he would.

* * *

“Come, Harry, don’t be shy. We’re not robbing anyone.”

“Shy? Me? You’ve twisted that out of me long ago,” Harry responded as he placed one foot in front of the other until they reached Slughorn’s living room, turning their backs away from the dim lights of the hallway.

A loud clatter met their ears from somewhere in the house and Voldemort went to sit by the window while Harry occupied himself by paying close attention to the countless pictures decorating the room. When his own face stared back at him from one of the pictures, Harry picked it up and held the frame out for the Dark Lord to inspect. An amused smirk was returned, which only spread when the loud bang echoed in the room as the tray of tea and biscuits smashed at Slughorn’s feet. How the man did not collapse from a heart attack, Harry did not know. The yellow of his face became even more sallow as he bore witness to Lord Voldemort and Harry Potter in his home, in the flesh and blood.

“Do sit down, Professor,” Voldemort ordered when Slughorn took a fearful step back, round eyes darting from the Dark Lord to Harry over and over again. Like prey in front of a predator. Though only a weakling, how many beats did he sense? One? *Two*? “Yes, on the couch, very good. I see you collect pictures of my very soul. You flatter us.”

The old man's gaze dropped to Harry's picture and then travelled up to his face. *Now there was one more who shared this secret.* He was aware of the horcrux and he was horrified by the knowledge of it. Death was a given now, as with his own words Voldemort had made sure of it.

"Such indifference in my company. And here I thought I was your favourite student even after all this time…." Grey eyes dramatically scrutinised the photos. "Or do you have one of my secrets hidden somewhere? Shall we go look for it?"

"No - I - I've kept your secrets! All of them!" Slughorn suddenly babbled, voice rising in a panicked crescendo and gaze unable to turn away from Voldemort's imposing figure at the window. *Not daring to*. "You must know I did! So many years, even when *he* came to ask! More than once! To no avail… so much time had passed and I said nothing, you know I did. Not a word, never, I—"

"I do know. Why else would you still be alive?"

Slughorn paled and Voldemort advanced. "I know of your loyalty. And I am more than aware of Dumbledore's ways. But the old cockroach will go past honourable means in his future approaches. Past words and request, even, and straight into memories. So, in a way, I firmly believe you are going to be in my debt for this."

Voldemort drew his wand faster than the professor drew his. With a thud the semi-bald head hit the green cushion as the Dark Lord wordlessly worked his charms.

* * *

"I thought you'd kill him, not bother with erasing his memories," confessed Harry as they strolled through the unnamed village following their encounter. Well, not unnamed, it must have a name as any other did. It just was not one Harry had been informed of.

"Yes, it would have been the wisest alternative. Dead men keep their secrets to themselves, and viciously so. Yet just as I was Horace's favourite student, it appears I have remained fond of him as well. After all… he never spoke of my secrets."

Harry's steps faltered. "Are you saying you were being kind?" How could Voldemort *be* kind? How could he care for anything after making more than one horcrux? How was it possible? Harry did not understand. To take an unnecessary risk was one thing, but to take a risk as a simple consequence of your compassion for him or her….

"Yes, my soul. I was."

"I don't understand. You aren't supposed to. This isn't how it works—"

Under the light of a street lamp Voldemort took hold of his forearm, forcing Harry to face him just as snow began to descend from the dark sky. And how strange that moment was…

Harry's head full of questions, his body shivering from the cold, and Voldemort… *Tom*... the sole anchor holding him in place. With white snowflakes in his dark hair and sparkling eyes, he seemed far more than just human. And he was — they both were now.

"What is it you're trying to say? Must I enter your mind to find out for myself?" Voldemort asked, yet somehow it sounded more like a threat. *How much easier would that be.* But the Dark Lord hated *easy* so Harry spoke, finding great pleasure in the way warmness spread from where Voldemort's fingers met his skin underneath the sleeves of Harry's jacket.

"You said you were kind in making Slughorn forget. *Kind*. But I can't be kind to anyone else other than you. Not since I made a horcrux. Is there something wrong with me?"

"Kindness is not necessarily an emotion, something that tugs at your very soul. The *kind* that we feel for each other." Voldemort leaned down in Harry's space, snow falling between their mouths. "Kindness can be gratification, the need to offer something for one's services. But… there is no need for lying — even *we* are fond of something. We do not love, but we appreciate. Things, information, living beings… even this weather."

How could Voldemort say they could not love when Harry ached to touch him? To please him? To give him everything in his power? What name had this emotion other than love? "So… am I okay?" was what left his lips instead.

Voldemort met his question with a faint smirk. "You are my soul and you cannot be anything else other than perfect." Then the Dark Lord kissed him, in that immaculate white fairytale, insistent and warm. With one arm still holding his own as the other threaded through Harry's hair, teeth nibbling at his lips, daring him to open his mouth. When Harry did, heat was replaced by burning. The coldness faded. Not even the uncomfortable feeling of Apparition separated their mouths and when it finally happened, moments after, Harry was taken aback by the ruin of a chamber in which they suddenly sat.

All around them was smashed windows and broken ceilings from which snow steadily lowered itself upon furniture, wrecked floors, and even their heads. It painted a beautiful picture, one brought to life from a forgotten dream and Harry pushed himself further into Voldemort's arms, breath tickling his face.

"Where have you brought us? What is this place?"

"The house where that despicable muggle lived. You do not remember?" Harry shook his head. "Oh, so you do not. No matter, I shall explain. Many years ago I killed my father right here inside this room. And his parents. It was painless and done with a single phrase. That time, too, I was kind." His grip on Harry's body tightened to the point of being uncomfortable and Harry frowned, undecided if it was wise to speak yet. But had he ever been wise?

"You're hurting me."

The fingers on his bare forearm dug deeper. "You hurt me as well," Voldemort confessed.

The accusation left Harry speechless for a time, struggling to place those words into a rational context. “I don’t understand. What have I done to you?” As he spoke, the Dark Lord lead him to the dust covered couch on which he sat before pulling Harry over his lap. His balance greatly at risk, Harry’s hands flew to the man’s broad shoulders and stayed there, nails digging into his fine coat. The two pairs of eyes did not let go of each other despite the air of danger, or the fact it grew colder.

“What have you done? A great deal, especially as of late. But I do not wish to talk about it. Your fault lies in yourself, albeit at times I refused to consider it a fault at all.” The fingers of his right hand rose to caress Harry’s cheek, sending a shiver down Harry’s spine and causing him to involuntarily arch his back until a firm grip on his hip slammed him back down on Voldemort’s legs. The Dark Lord smiled as if learning a secret. “You’ve made me become quite attached to you, that is what you’re guilty of. Not only because of the soul sharing matter, and not even your importance in relation to Dumbledore. No, you’ve made me become attached to *you*. In the time spent in my home you achieved this and then left, leaving me all alone. Alone with my thoughts, missing your presence even in the moments I was not supposed to. While I had my meals, while I read, while I tortured, and while I killed.”

If Harry was the one who leaned down or if Voldemort titled his chin up… it made little difference. A kiss was still a kiss. And what a kiss it was! Harry was sure this man must be the owner of his lips. They fitted together too perfectly, tongues tracing over teeth and teeth tracing over lips. With a tiny bite thrown in here and there, just to remember who he was offering himself to. As if Harry could forget! What they were doing to each other broke any previous imagination of intimacy. This was much more.

Their eyes met and held.

“Up.”

The command felt as heavy as Voldemort’s gaze but Harry did as he was told, and then some. Stripping had not been in the previous instruction yet no complaint met his ears when he did. Voldemort had also rose and went to stand behind Harry only to inch forward, nearly touching but not quite. Harry’s back barely tapped his chest; the only source of warmth in this wintry room. His toes were freezing but his breath remained laboured, excitement bubbling in the pit of his stomach. Harry was unable to glimpse the man’s face yet he could bet his wand that Voldemort was wearing his triumphant smirk. But this was a game two could play.

“Shall I bend over, my Lord?”

The gratification of that sharp inhale of breath was glorious and the awkwardness of muttering those words was washed away by desire — his, yes, but mostly Voldemort’s. It was palpable in a way that should not be possible.

“Careful not to slip from all that trembling,” the Dark Lord appealed, tone full of malice. Nails curled into the flesh of Harry’s thigh. “Push back your hips for me like a good boy.”

All breath left Harry's lungs and his forehead fell upon the ruined cushion, goosebumps breaking out over his skin. Voldemort's lips found the skin of his neck and latched onto it again and again until Harry felt like there was not enough air in this ruin of a house with broken walls and windows. The Dark Lord's hold tightened on his hips and Harry did not need magic to know that the marks would be etched into his skin for quite some time. Without being told, he turned and chased after Voldemort's lips. Whines and gasps left his mouth and it registered quite some time later there was skin on skin contact. *Magic*. Then, when the Dark Lord pulled his cheeks apart, a tremor shook through Harry, fingers clawing against dusty and decayed material. *This was really happening*. Lord Voldemort was going to fuck him.

Harry talked while he still could. "I've neve—"

"Oh, Harry. You really thought I would not know?"

The wetness nestling against Harry's entrance made him choke. It was too much to feel all at once… First Voldemort's wicked tongue burying itself inside him, then a finger, then two. Eyes tightly shut, Harry slumped forward to lay dazed from his bliss, belatedly realising he'd come just on the Dark Lord's fingers before he had even added a third.

Silence rang in the room, broken only by Harry's uneven pants at first.

"You're really made for me, *darling*," drawled Voldemort, the word dripping with obscenity. "Spread your legs wider and take a deep breath." He held Harry still as he thrust in."Tell me when to move."

Harry's voice was wrecked. "Now," he managed to let out breaths later, skin crawling with the feeling of being impossibly full.

And so the Dark Lord fucked into him, first on his hands and knees and then on his back. With parted lips and grey eyes full of desire, he pinned Harry down as hard as he could. Resting his forearms on either side of Harry's head, Voldemort sharply snapped his hips. No door was closed anymore with this man between Harry's legs. And as if aware of his thoughts, the Dark Lord pushed as deep as he could go and stopped right there, torturing them both and proving Harry right. Lips grazed as eyes gazed and it was too quiet, too much, too intimate. There was no lies, no pretending, just Voldemort blinking down at him with such emotion in his stare that Harry's heart skipped a beat.

Craning his neck, Harry had their lips return to each other. The kiss was slow and sensual, Voldemort's black hair like ink against Harry's fingers. Voldemort groaned into his mouth and Harry knew he loved this man more than anything. And that, in spite of his earlier words, Voldemort loved him too. Otherwise why else would he look at Harry like that?

Like Harry truly was his Chosen One.

* * *

Albus' game was becoming too risky. The Longbottom boy proved himself to be worse than Potter, a traitor *and* a fool. Severus snickered. What mighty saviours the universe had blessed them with. And still Albus pressed on with the Dark Lord's memories, hoping the boy would know what to do after Albus' imminent death. He had failed with the first boy, why would this one be any better?

These were his thoughts as he arrived at the address Albus informed him about mere minutes ago. A forgettable house in a forgettable town and completely contradictory to what Severus expected from Horace Slughorn. Then again, if the Dark Lord was after you it was to be expected that you would not want to live in a flashy palace.

Severus stepped inside the house without knocking. He anticipated a tense conversation among three; Horace, Albus, and the Longbottom boy. To be caught in another failed attempt at gaining the specific memory. But instead Severus was met with Horace asleep in his chair with Albus' wand upon his temple. Logs peacefully burned in the fireplace nearby. The headmaster was frowning as he worked, greyish hand slightly quivering and reflecting long shadows upon the wall.

"All memories concerning that meeting with Tom are gone," Albus finally sighed, placing a little distance between him and the unconscious man.

"What did you do?"

"He was smiling as he welcomed me in, like old times. I came to make a last call upon Horace's conscience, to bargain for the memory by any means possible. Imagine my surprise when he genuinely did not know what I was talking about."

The Potions master did not appear harmed. Horace rested, quietly snoring, oblivious to the presence of his guests. A memory charm. It had to be. Cast by an immensely powerful individual if even Albus had not managed to find a trace of reality left behind. Severus knew of only one other as skilful as him in the mind arts. But would the Dark Lord have really allowed the old professor to live? Severus shared Albus' concerns.

"It was Tom. There's no doubt in my mind about it was him." Blue eyes travelled across the cosy living room, from the furniture to the pictures on display, little trophies collected over many years. "I cannot wholly grasp his motivation, but at least we know two things. Tom is getting more and more desperate by trying to bury his secrets…"

"And the second?" Severus impatiently pressed on.

"He had company this time."

Following the direction of Albus' gaze, Severus saw it. Of all the frames, only the one in which Potter proudly held his chin up was out of place. Dust covered its usual spot and Severus ground his teeth together as throwing a curse at the damned image would be unacceptable in present company. In a mocking and utterly defiant way, Potter smiled at the camera, his green eyes framed by dark lashes blinking once every few moments.

The damned brat had accompanied the Dark Lord. Again. Although there was some reasoning behind the action, Severus was beginning to suspect it. Obsession alone could not explain why Harry had come along. The Dark Lord had wanted the boy and now he had him, quite willingly as well. They both must have been happy these last few hours. Together, plotting, destroying other people's futures. Uncaring. Had the Dark Lord kept Potter close even here? The memory of their visit in his home surfaced and Severus had to fight a shudder. There was something rotten between them, something more than a horcrux and worse than a mad man's obsession of having Potter in his clutches.

With lips tightly shut, Severus' thoughts remained his own. But of course Albus saw. Though he did not ask. Instead the headmaster busied himself with levitating Horace to bed while probably concocting new schemes at the same time.

"Longbottom's attempts just became meaningless. And the Dark Lord more powerful." *And Potter more dangerous.*

"No one wins every single time, Severus," Albus' gentle voice disclosed as he motioned for them to depart. "Not even Tom… not even Harry."

This was not about winning. This was about life and death and he and Albus were on the losing side. Still… stranger things had happened to worse men. Severus could work with that, he realised while gazing at the snowflakes as they disappeared upon contact with the ground, never to rise again.

Hope took shape before his eyes.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

beta by the amazing Vanillaghost

For the first time in a long while, Harry awoke in a lighter mood. In a state of happiness even, dare he call it so. Memories leisurely crept into the deserted corners of his mind with every conscious breath he took, and all were bound to one single being…

Voldemort.

Voldemort's demanding lips on his, the other half of his soul inside him. One, in the most practical sense of the word…

Harry was overwhelmed.

Then like an unwanted guest, the cold disclosed its presence. It surrounded each thing that could be surrounded and Harry came to the conclusion that he was not able to feel most of his naked body, especially his legs, down to his toes. In spite of the numbness, no panic surfaced. Harry knew where he was and who he was with. Voldemort's body glued to his offered both answers and the necessary warmth. The only heat, underneath him, where there was only iciness everywhere else. Harry had expected to wake up at home in one of their beds, not still here on this grimy couch and perhaps the exact same place Voldemort had murdered what was left of his family.

Soft breathing against his skin had Harry taking care in moving his head on the man's chest in order to catch sight of his face. But that's when breathing proved difficult. Voldemort was so handsome with his black curls now messy and lips slightly parted. Harry could look at him forever, gaze at the way his chest rose and fell, imagining himself trailing kisses all over it. Would Voldemort allow that? Would he welcome it?

Asleep, Voldemort did not resemble a Dark Lord quite so much. He did not even resemble the dreadful persona of Voldemort. In that moment, Harry was in Tom's powerful arms, listening to his heartbeat, already anticipating and fantasising about their next time together. Because there had to be a second time. There just had to be. They but only needed to talk first.

What did normal people even do when waking up with a lover after their first night together? No one had told Harry these kind of things. He had not watched any romance movies either, least of all books of this kind. So what was there to do? Should Harry attempt to sleep yet again? Perhaps…

But his eyes traced over Voldemort's peaceful features, to his lips. How nice and intimate — and honestly, an honour — to see the Dark Lord displaying such bare vulnerability. Harry's fingers could not resist the temptation as he traced shapeless forms on the man's bare torso, over skin and bone. A tremor seized Harry's body; how right it felt! With no harm done, Harry made himself comfortable above *Tom's* heart. A new favourite place was growing on him. The picture of their life together unfolded. An endless one filled with beds and deep conversations and cheeky remarks that bordered on insults. Harry found himself smiling at the fantasy.

"I can hear your thoughts."

Both the voice and the movement underneath Harry took him by surprise. "Can you?" he asked, uncertain as fingers dove into his hair to keep him where he was.

Voldemort hummed and Harry felt it as if it had come from him. "A figure of speech… Although it could be arranged, if you will it so."

Amusement was as good a way to start the day as any. And Harry had been dreading this conversation moments before. How childish of him. For them, silences never grew uncomfortable. They were filled with pointed looks, curious eyes, arrogant smirks and the occasional trace of cruelty. The rest was silence no more.

Even with the nameless weight around his heart, their silence was glorious. So, acting on what needed to be done, Harry took a deep breath and spoke his fear.

"What are we now?"

He pushed himself up, leaning back in order to gaze down at Voldemort's face.

Head tilted, the man regarded him as well. "Must you search for a name? It is really a necessity? Does it help you sleep better at night?" He went on, not waiting for an answer. "Partners, soulmates, lovers… to offer an answer to your question, I suppose we are everything."

To each other was left unsaid.

"And you want this to continue…"

"I would not have engaged in our wonderful activities in the first place if I had not."

The grin that snuck its way onto Harry's lips could not be helped. "That's good. Wonderful. I want this too."

Voldemort pushed himself up, fingers cradling Harry's cheeks. Like a baby, like a doll, like everything the Dark Lord wanted him to be. "You know… I believe I did not keep true to my word last night… We cannot have that. Ruins my flawless reputation." Eyes like razors regarded Harry, fingers tapping at the corner of Harry's mouth to a rhythm heard only by him. "*We'll be together and I'll be in this pretty mouth of yours.*" A pointed pause

accompanied a smirk, aiding the cold in delivering shivers down Harry's spine. "*My joy*, my soul. So, my Harry, be a good boy and get on your knees."

All breath was knocked out of Harry's chest. He blinked at the smugness Voldemort evoked. More than smugness; provocation and desire, as he waited for the inevitable. Both knew Harry would oblige. And when his knees hit the floor while his eyes never left the Dark Lord, Harry's stomach was in knots. As blind as he was in this kind of situation, he did not want to disappoint.

But there was no disappointment looking down at him. Only uneven breaths changing rhythm with each movement of Harry's fingers on Voldemort's thighs. Oh, he was a promising student, it seemed. Bet on the Dark Lord's cunningness to teach him everything.

"Ask and you shall receive," the man kindly offered with his grey gaze full of mockery.

"Or I could simply leave you like this," teased Harry, not meaning a word of it.

Voldemort read him like an open book yet his hold on Harry's hair grew sharp and their lips neared.

"*Or* you could open your mouth."

Harry, of course, did.

* * *

Harry was to take part in his first Death Eaters meeting that evening. It needed to happen sooner or later though he would rather stay in bed with Voldemort all day — especially now — back at their manor. There was no cold and dust there. It was home, after all, and if Harry called out the Dark Lord's name too loudly and the house elves heard, at least the tiny creatures would never bring up the subject. And the name… sometimes it was Voldemort, sometimes *Tom*. Both only spurred the man on, but especially the latter. When *Tom* went past Harry's lips, the thrusts went even deeper and their mouths took longer to part. Harry chose to save the three lettered name for moments like those. Might do so for other circumstances another day.

It was December 15th and outside the walls it kept on snowing. If Harry did not dread the cold, he would have requested a trip outside himself and even built a snowman. So his reluctance as Voldemort tugged him to his feet was to be understood considering the man spoke of *outside* in this dreadful weather.

"Outside."

"Yes, Harry. Outside. Now come, I have a surprise."

Harry yielded and decided not to comment on their poor fashion choice for the occasion. No coats or proper shoes, Voldemort led him *outside*. Not to the garden Harry was used to, but around the side of the house and down a snow covered path of stairs.

No winter awaited at the end of it. Like a glass globe, the place before his eyes was from another world, a world full of spring. The clear water of the lake gleamed like an invitation and the grass on which they stepped offered worthy competition.

“My kingdom, for your pleasure,” Voldemort proudly declared.

Harry threw himself into the man’s arms and they rolled around the grass like children. Sometimes fucking, sometimes not. It had no importance, Harry was happy either way. And this Voldemort who smirked more often and pinned Harry underneath him, kissing at the skin of his neck and not letting go no matter how hard Harry laughed and begged him to stop… This Voldemort was wonderful too. Harry loved him just as he loved the cruel Dark Lord who devoured him with his very presence.

“Are you ever afraid?” Harry asked hours later, floating on his back in the warm waters of the lake while steady hands kept him there.

Voldemort’s voice sounded excessively soft in his ears half sprinkled with wetness. “Do you think I am?”

“I don’t know,” Harry truthfully answered, eyes both on the sky and Voldemort.

An infectious grin spread across the man’s lips. “Good. That's how it should be.” At Harry’s furrowed brow, the Dark Lord elaborated: “Appearances do matter, my soul. There is power both in power itself and the illusion of it. You see…. we are not fully human anymore yet still from that we began. Emotions and all sorts of behaviours, fear… We still harbour them. So, Harry, I do feel some amount of fear. Quite a convenient one, one might say. I do not let it rule me but it places things into perspective. It lets you know what you truly cherish and what is your weakest spot. Makes everything clear.” Voldemort pointed to their home up the stairs and then winked, making Harry laugh. “Even Lord Voldemort feels fear but this shall remain between us.”

The laugh bubbling in Harry's throat destabilised him for a tiny second until Voldemort’s arms were there to catch him. He glued Harry to him, skin on skin, nibbling at the corner of his mouth. Yet as soon as Harry presented his lips for a kiss, Voldemort pulled back with an arch eyebrow, obviously in a good mood.

“Tell me something about you. Something I do not know.”

But he already knew so much about Harry… With his fingers in the wet curls at Voldemort’s nape, Harry furrowed his brow, thinking. “Well…” he trailed, “I’m the best duelist among the students at Hogwarts and the best at many other things which you have taught me. Something else… I like flying. How amazing it would be to fly without a broom!” Voldemort smiled at that. “And…” Damn, the Dark Lord really knew everything. The only thing that remained… “Back at my aunt and uncle’s house… things were not so good. There was no affection, no

appreciation, no money or a room to call my own. Occasional beatings and sometimes no food."

All mischief abandoned Voldemort. His arms froze around Harry's middle as he stared down at him. A moment — two, then three. Such a fixated look he had. Oh well, at least Harry had responded to his request. Something new had been shared.

"It's ok," Harry hurried to add.

"No," Voldemort hissed against his mouth. "I suggest you let Dumbledore know he is in dire need of dark clothing. After all, it would be anything but polite to present himself at the muggles' funeral in pink robes."

Harry did not doubt his promise for a second. "Want to know another thing? Tell no one about this but I had the biggest crush on you when I saw the memory from the diary back in my second year."

Both were back to smiling now. Voldemort's mouth had the faintest taste of salt from the water, or maybe it came from Harry's lips. Pants and moans were lazily exchanged, both far too tired for anything else. Wiggling their feet so as to stay afloat *and* kissing was enough of a challenge for one day.

This was the life he wanted. No death and no pain, just Voldemort and him. Here or anywhere else in the universe. The rest of the world could fall apart for all Harry cared. But of course there was more. Voldemort was Voldemort. Satisfaction was not in his nature. And Harry could follow that road if the Dark Lord led him. Maybe no point to call an end existed… But it was fine either way. They will win everything was there to win. Many things could change, but not this. Here in the middle of the lake they lived one of those endless points. Now it was love, tomorrow could be knowledge, and the day after tomorrow could be torture. Life went on. Forever, for them.

* * *

All eyes were wide as Harry and Voldemort made their grand entrance. And perhaps, for the very first time, not out of fear and awe of the Dark Lord. But for The Boy Who Lived. Or maybe the sight of them together was far too overwhelming. Either way, Harry would be lying if he were to deny his satisfaction as he followed in Voldemort's footsteps and sat in the empty place to the man's right. Then silence descended.

Lucius Malfoy blinked exceedingly often and Draco's face shared the same pallor of his hair. But the Malfoys weren't the only ones taken aback by Harry's presence and his general well-being. The heavy pants coming from Bellatrix and the sharp looks from the other strangers… all travelled in the same direction.

The two of them, together… it was more than anyone could ever fathom.

“Yes, Harry Potter is in your presence. I do not suppose any of you are in need of muggle devices such as glasses in order to confirm it,” Voldemort mocked. “Shall I freshen your memory? As it seems you are all so terribly confused by my guest. *Mine*. Harry Potter has and will always be mine so do not gaze at him this way. Do not insult him if you do not wish to feel my wrath — and I assure you, you will beg for death if that were to happen. As for what will be your punishment… I’ll allow your imagination to do the trick.”

It contradicted the violence of that promise but Harry had the urge to gently link their fingers together. Both of Voldemort’s hands rested on the table and Harry’s own were in his lap. So he did nothing but listen, already debating on ways to repay the Dark Lord’s care and appreciation.

“My Lord,” Lucius’ measured voice put an end to his reveries. “Is Severus aware of the boy’s… shift in allegiances?”

The *shift in allegiances* part sounded like a question as well. Which was to be understood. Voldemort hadn’t really bothered to explain how Harry came to stand beside him. Was it betrayal? Torture? Something else entirely? Harry could already picture the conspiracy theories flying around, soon to be shared. Him having always been the Dark Lord’s spy in the heart of the Order. Or that he had his memory erased. Maybe there would even be some wild theory in which Harry was some kind of long lost relative of Voldemort. Truthfully, it was no matter. Let them dream. For the Dark Lord witnessed every one of them.

Voldemort told Lucius the truth, more or less. He failed to mention the Unbreakable Vow but Harry’s position was told to be no secret to the Potions master currently at Hogwarts. Draco failed to mask his surprise and unease. The only time he had met Harry’s eyes, he shuddered and looked the other way instantly. Oh, Harry was making the prat uncomfortable. Good. Very, very good.

It appeared this meeting served more than one purpose. Disclosing The Boy Who Lived to being on the Dark Lord’s side, *and* actual Death Eater matters. Like a few individuals who Harry learned to be politicians and a few others who had vast amounts of money to spare and the right cause to invest in. More than two hours passed that way. Lengthy discussions about a legislative project on the Statute of Secrecy and then it was over.

Only one individual remained behind, a man who seemed to be aware his presence was requested without explicitly being told so. Quite a rare talent to have.

The person who bowed before both Voldemort and Harry was almost as tall as the Dark Lord. Long limbs and a gaunt face, shadows underneath his eyes and oozing the apprehensive sensation of peril. Harry drummed his fingers on the table and the stranger’s sharp eyes followed the movement like a hawk. Harry stilled.

“Your answer?”

Voldemort’s divine intervention made the man gaze away.

“We bow before you, my Lord. Me and my kind. Though, of course, under the privileges we previously settled on…” The man had that talent of evoking a certain air of boredom or

reluctance as he spoke.

“I never break my word, Sanguini.”

Voldemort’s reassurance resembled a threat, if you asked Harry. Their guest did not seem to notice or care. Sanguini merely grinned, sneaked another look at Harry, and bowed elegantly before he retreated with careful steps, in no hurry at all, as if he had all the time in the world.

This Sanguini had some nerve.

“He wasn't human, am I right?”

“First time meeting a vampire?”

Voldemort had stood as well and was offering to hold Harry’s hand, an offer which he immediately accepted. This man was really on the same tune as him. That or it was mind reading.

“Wha—” Harry marvelled, eyes flying to the door where Sanguini had just disappeared through. “Do they get along with the werewolves serving you?”

A laugh bubbled in the back of Voldemort’s throat as they travelled through the corridors of Malfoy Manor, hand in hand. “I am most surprised you had the time to assimilate that muggle rubbish while I was infinitely searching for you, with or without a proper body. Tell me, were they books? Something more modern? Films?”

Voldemort’s voice was full of mirth.

“Doesn't matter,” Harry half-heartedly defended himself, waving his free hand. “How was I supposed to know Greyback and Sanguini were best pals?”

Another laugh and Harry was mesmerised. Their joined hands were childishly swinging and Voldemort looked happy. It didn’t matter why, the Dark Lord was happy! What more should Harry wish for when he was feeling the same?

“You’re not frowning quite so much these days,” Harry confided in a heartbeat.

“I rarely frown in your presence these days. When you look at me like that, such an action would be impossible. Especially with how smitten you look.”

Faint pink tinging his cheeks, Harry chose not to answer and Voldemort appeared terribly smug. From a certain point of view, this was happiness. Even if they were in Draco’s home where the walls lacked any warmth, even if they had a million other things to do. Dumbledore, the diadem, winning this war… But that would all happen tomorrow. For today, they had this. They had *them*.

* * *

“I was thinking about escorting your remaining relatives to an early grave.”

The statement came late into the night when he and Voldemort were lying in bed with two cups of coffee floating before them. There were no stains on the bed sheets. Not yet, at least.

“Because of what they did to me?”

Voldemort’s fingers ceased their tapping on Harry’s bare shoulder. “Because they hurt my soul,” he simplified.

“A lot of people hurt me. Do you want a list?”

It was meant as a joke but obviously Voldemort decided not to play along.

“I do. But name a few for now.”

Harry blinked at the two cups before he adjusted his position to glimpse the concentration on the other man’s face. Head resting on Voldemort’s chest, Harry spoke.

“Hurt… That depends on what you understand by ‘hurt’. Physically? The Dursleys, Umbridge, *you*. Mentally? The Dursleys, Snape, Dumbledore, *you*. People I want to kill? People I want *you* to kill? I really don't know. And honestly… I really don't care. Maybe I should wish them to be hurt, killed even… But then again, their lives are going to change soon. So why bother moving a finger this instant? I'd rather be here with you.”

“Yes… we did hurt one another, viciously so, and for many years. In your answer you brought up good points and I’m quite proud of you for that. Certainly, their lives would shatter and I daresay soon. Yet I still wish them a slow and agonising death,” Voldemort affirmed in a contemplative tone. “This strange urge gripped me, to pay back what you are owed for all your suffering. Severus is still useful but the rest… At this moment you are far too comfortable to imagine any retribution yet perhaps someday you’ll change your mind.” His fingers resumed their tapping. “And if not… occasions requiring gifts will arrive soon enough.”

The Dark Lord had a point. *And a grudge*. If only Harry could be bothered to care. Yes, perhaps someday. Perhaps Voldemort would kill them all. He had made no secret of his wish to cross Harry… no, *cross* sounded wrong. Properly said, Voldemort had announced the pursuit of his own interest which only now happened to coincide with Harry’s. Stranger things had happened. And months before *this* would have been one of those strange things.

Harry and Voldemort.

The older man must have followed his thoughts considering his pleased smirk. It was almost morning and they should go to sleep but time was passing far too swiftly and Harry was to return to Hogwarts soon. But that was not the point. The point was that Harry would rather look at his lover if given a choice and Voldemort was giving him plenty. A rare kindness indeed.

The next few days were a wonder. They had a routine. At whatever hour sleep decided to take its leave, he and Voldemort would go down the familiar set of stairs, past the reigning snow and to the little kingdom the Dark Lord had built. A table and two chairs could now be found in close vicinity to the lake and whatever meal they had, it was served there. Then they swum, followed by the usual sex. Harry loved it. He loved Voldemort and he was sure the man loved him as well though he did not say it.

Let him keep his silence, Harry thought. Voldemort's eyes did enough talking on their own.

When he was inside Harry with their mouths a breath apart, the Dark Lord stared down at him as if wishing to devour him. Never had Voldemort looked away. Not when he had Harry on his back, not when Harry was on top of him, and least of all when Harry went to his knees and presented his mouth. And oh, not even when Voldemort had his tongue inside Harry, steady hands keeping his thighs up and parted. Not even then did their eyes separate. It was oddly fitting in a way. Since they shared souls, any kind of separation would be unbecoming.

The Death Eater meetings followed every three nights. Harry got used to them as well, even with Snape's occasional presence. Harry had a habit of glaring at the greasy-haired man who glared right back before proceeding to ignore him for the rest of the meeting. Voldemort pushed neither of them so the tension persisted. It needed to be solved but it seemed no matter how much Harry insisted Snape was not to be trusted, the Dark Lord insisted he knew best. Of all the things they could quarrel about and they had chosen Snape. But in spite of his lover's valid arguments, Harry was sure he was right. He trusted Voldemort in all things — trusted his knowledge and his experience — but not in this one matter. So Snape still arrived to the usual gatherings and Harry's mouth remained shut. Either way, Voldemort knew his thoughts on the matter.

In any case, between the Death Eaters and the lake, they still had their talks and their trust. Better said, it was a little game Harry had proposed one time after they slept together.

"Now we are engaging in the 'trust thing' as you call it," Harry announced, sitting cross-legged in front of the Dark Lord. "So proceed. Ask me something."

"I fail to see the purpose of this activity of yours. I happen to already know a great amount of information about you and everything else concerning you."

"Oh, please. You can't possibly know everything. Come on, just ask whatever you want."

As always, Voldemort humoured him and leaned back in one of the two chairs by the lake. Harry preferred to sit directly on the grass, offering himself a fantastic view of Voldemort's bare body. All those toned muscles in the light of day… of course Harry stared. He was stared at too.

"Fine, Harry. Share with me what you have shared with no one else. The darkest thought you've ever had."

Ok, so Voldemort had never heard of going soft at first. But the question was a good one. And, well, Harry had had plenty of dark thoughts to pick from.

“I’ve had quite a few, but the darkest… I was not at Hogwarts yet, eight or nine years old. My cousin, Dudley, nearly broke my arm and no one bothered with a visit to the hospital. My uncle warned me to stop whining and locked the cupboard behind him with me still in it. And I… I laid in my bed and imagined all three of them burning to death. Screaming their lungs out before me and in that fantasy I was the one who lit the fire. The thing was… I could have done it… I knew that if I wished for it hard enough, my mysterious powers could make it happen.”

“So why didn’t you?” Voldemort asked.

“I’ll explain in a moment. You see… that’s the darkest part, not the burning fantasy. Their salvation wasn’t due to any idea of mercy or some love for them… Or even because I saw the act as evil… But for the fact that I didn’t want to end up in an orphanage,” Harry confessed.

There it was. Harry had finally said it. The act of telling was precious in itself yet having the Dark Lord look at him with a faint smirk… this was the true reward. Harry would have lied if he said anything else was to be expected. There was too much understanding between them for judgement. They simply listened, each the other’s favourite entertainer.

Harry raised his hand and Voldemort met him halfway. “My turn. *Your* darkest thought now.”

“How cunning of you, my soul. As you may guess, ever since I was just a boy all my thoughts were dark. And then they darkened some more. And so on… until I met you. Before, I believed I could not do any worse… and then I saw you bound to my father’s grave.” The smirk Voldemort wore was predatory, his fingers gently touching Harry’s in a mysterious dance. “Before meeting you, I never thought to force myself onto another person. Murder and torture was the peak. Yet I thought of you underneath me… when I breathed your air…. when I duelled you… when you ran away from me. And after. Months after…”

Harry could not say exactly how that confession made him feel. Sure enough, he loved this man. But this was *now*. If the act had been performed *then*... who knew what would have happened. Would Harry still have ended up loving Voldemort? Another good question with no possible answer.

“In a way you got your wish,” Harry said.

Voldemort made a show of pressing his lips to Harry’s open palm. “And you could still get yours.”

Over these past few months, Voldemort had developed a morbid yet fascinating skill. Beneath cruel words and stained promises, he managed to have the habit and ability to conjure smiles onto Harry’s lips.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

beta by the amazing Vanillaghost

They were going to be apart for a while again. Voldemort's birthday had passed in the same manner as their fairytale place by the lake. It struck Harry like lightning. He had no proper sleep the night before his departure. Not that he usually slept much since the horcrux.

But Hogwarts… Hogwarts was both the punishment and the test.

"I want to go for a walk. Not around the mansion or the summer place. Just around," Harry said. "Explore for a bit."

Voldemort did not appear to be in any mood for such a thing but he complied. After all, Harry was leaving for Hogwarts in little over two hours. It was a small price to pay for being together for a time.

The woods were white, the winter sky nearly so, and Harry's thoughts the complete opposite. It wasn't supposed to be like this. Yes, he should be downhearted, but he shouldn't feel this panic. This arising stubbornness at the thought of leaving. Yet how could this silent war come to an end if Harry didn't see to his part of the deal? This irrationality… it had no importance, no solid ground to stand upon and justify itself to himself and Voldemort. Everything would be just fine. It had to! Yes, he will retrieve Voldemort's soul and then be gone. Albeit with Snape's help, but still. As long as Harry got back to the Dark Lord it was perfectly all right either way.

Their eyes met. "We ought to go somewhere after we win this war," Voldemort shared as they took the slowest route back home, delaying the inevitable.

"Where?"

"Places," came the anti-climatic answer. "Places I lived periods of my life in after leaving Hogwarts. Albania, Germany, Austria… perhaps in the East somewhere."

Harry laughed. "Now you got me dreaming about such a time. It'll be like… like —" The forbidden word almost left his lips.

They carried on with their stroll but Voldemort's gaze lingered on him with no pretence of subtlety. Just genuine curiosity and maybe the faintest bit of worry in those grey orbs which shimmered in the morning sunlight.

“Like what, Harry?”

“Like…” Harry strived to keep his voice steady, searching for a believable lie only to end up confessing the truth. “Like a family on vacation, I think. I mean, it’s not as if I’ve participated in this type of activity before…”

Voldemort’s observing gaze grew sharper, expression neutral as a faint wind blew through his black hair. Were Harry’s thoughts that childish to him? That petty? Or perhaps he was terribly amusing to the older man. But the Dark Lord must have felt *something*. It always happened this way when it came to Harry, to his very soul.

“You say the strangest things,” Voldemort fondly spoke and yes, there it was. The mirth creeping in at the corner of his eyes. “Family, partner, mentor…. husband. I am everything and so much more. There are many names for the same thing, or at least that is my philosophy. So why should I deny you?”

Harry grinned into the collar of his coat and tread near the older man, fanning his breath over cold skin. “Even if I call you Tom?”

“My precious soul… I get a great deal of pleasure out of your voice yet this one thing falls into the wrong side of the river.”

With that, the conversation was over and, with the faintest regret, Harry gave up and followed by brushing his lips against Voldemort’s. Neither found any offence in this, at least.

* * *

Just as last time, Harry arrived at Kings Cross by himself. Voldemort was supposed to accompany him as Harry’s secretive lover whom everyone was dying to know about, but something occurred at the Ministry so here Harry was, alone. Watching people as they boarded, and the scenery flying by while the train raced back to Hogwarts. Harry was forced to listen to Neville, Luna, and Ginny discussing the Dark Lord as he missed the man. At least Ron and Hermione were away on Perfect business.

“He’s scheming, I just know it. Doesn’t show his face, doesn’t feed the rumours that he’s back, but he schemes. Mocking those who doubt him.”

Neville exchanged a look with Harry at Ginny’s firm words. The boy was turning whiter with every passing mention of Lord Voldemort. *Been there, done that,* Harry noted with amusement. As of now he could finally be in the other boy’s company and not have an existential crisis. There was nothing to worry about anymore, absolutely nothing Neville or Dumbledore could find out from Slughorn because Slughorn did not remember. Just picturing the two in a grave conversation with the amnesiac professor was enough to make Harry dissolve into laughter. But he managed to refrain at that moment, though the imagining of it…

“Yeah, well… Dumbledore is still here.”

How easy it was to offer up hope.

And it was Luna, sweet Luna, who spoke next. As tactless as ever. Harry needed to buy her a chocolate or something.

“Harry, can you tell us about the vacation with your boyfriend? Did you build a snowman? Have snow fights?”

Now the three smiled, maybe at her words or at her questions. Not realising the subject had remained the same. Harry indulged her and began his tale. It most probably was one of the last times they would truly find joy in each other’s company. Or at least… the last time they would see Harry as they did now. There was some nostalgia in it. But no regret.

* * *

By midnight Harry felt terribly impatient. This was it, it was finally happening. All that was left was to wait for the first year Gryffindor who was dragging herself up to the girls dormitory so terribly slowly. Snape had been informed about meeting him in Hogsmeade forty minutes from now and *finally* his housemate’s pale head disappeared around the corner.

Harry was on his feet and out the common room in the blink of an eye, invisibility cloak acting as a shield from any unwanted attention.

He would see Voldemort soon!

Snape must have already informed the Dark Lord of Harry’s arrival. Truth was, he hadn’t been expecting the right occasion to occur so soon, and on the very first day back at Hogwarts. Only Dumbledore was not at school, most probably spending his remaining days in a fruitless search for the remaining horcruxes, not grasping that one hid right below his nose. Life had the most peculiar sense of humour sometimes. Point was, Harry had no one to trouble him and his business.

The tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy awaited like an old friend, torches illuminating the intricate shapes upon it. One time, two times, three times Harry shut his eyes, imagining the diadem and Voldemort’s familiar face, his silhouette. *I’m here for Tom’s soul, I’m here for Tom’s soul, I’m here for Tom’s soul.* Then a door appeared to which Harry ran to, placing the clock in the crook of his arm.

So much dusty furniture met his gaze, so many unnecessary objects never to be needed again. Colorful jars in different colours, cheap-looking jewellery, even something that resembled a miniature set of trains sprawled over a vast portion of the floor. To think this was the same place Harry taught last year… how wonderful magic was! Yet he was growing impatient and there was no time to lose, least of all to being in awe.

Harry stopped and listened, and at first nothing met his ears but silence — and, of all things, the merry sound of birds somewhere nearby.

Tom, Tom, Tom and the diadem.

The familiar humming arrived when Harry was on the verge of losing hope. Just like the locket, its soft muttering lead Harry closer and closer, stepping over the compact train tracks and straight to one of the overcrowded tables. He did not glimpse the diadem but saw its box. Brown and ancient, collecting dust where once it had collected blood. Harry's fingers hurried in pushing the lid back and he grinned.

Lord Voldemort's soul indeed. It was pretty, all curved silver lines with a sky-blue jewel right at the top. Only this beauty was not the reason it was so remarkable. The power is what glorified this diadem, made it seem divine. Promising supremacy if you'd only reach out and take it. Just like the diary, just like the locket. A clever trap. But Voldemort's soul was his very own and the diadem belonged to him. So it was picked with fingers edging at the precious stone when Harry's blood froze in his veins.

"My boy… would you believe me if I said I had hope for you until the end?"

Dumbledore had been behind him, wand in hand, looking crushed. Harry's ability to speak left him. Voldemort's soul was so nearly in his hands forever, but at the same time in such danger. The birds carried on their singing as Harry gripped the diadem and made to circle the table with his eyes on Dumbledore, the major threat. But there, like a black nightmare, Snape waited. He had no wand, his presence enough to lay waste to Harry's hopes. *Traitor, traitor, traitor.*

But the end? Here? No.

In the middle of this thought Harry fell, cheek smashing against the floor and brushing one of the miniature trains. Both his face and his left palm stung and his fingers grew warm. Blinking among the dark spots clouding his vision, Harry saw blood dripping from where he had pricked his fingers on the diadem. It collected blood yet again.

* * *

There were no chains to hold him. Only a cell, darkness, and himself for company. How much time had passed… Harry did not know. A few hours? Maybe a few days, maybe more. Harry felt alien in this place in which he woke up, in this cavernous space bare of anything except for the sleeping mat. Oh, how he missed his room in Voldemort's manor, the library, the summer place in which they had their breakfast. The deep blue waters of the lake in which they swum as the curtain of snow descended outside…

Hot anger filled Harry at the thought of never catching sight of it again. Of never seeing Voldemort again. Of the reality of losing their soul, of failing. He exhaled loudly, blinking

back tears. What if they killed Harry? What if they killed him and the Dark Lord did not even know? After all, none had ever felt the destruction of a horcrux on their skin. So he could die, he could be buried in the rotten ground or scattered in the wind and Voldemort would calmly live his life for just a while more. The traitorous scum, Snape, would see to it. How badly Harry burned to scream *I told you so* at his lover… yet, for now, all he had were these walls. Not Azkaban, he noted. There were no Dementors near. Just a barely lit cell with a grand view to a interminable corridor and his rising panic to keep him company.

Horcrux or not, Harry was terrified of dying. A shudder shook his body. No, no matter what, he will live. Live and live or die and live again, the end was the same. Strong, he could be strong. *He needed to*. Harry will eat his food and wait. Eventually Voldemort would realize something was wrong and he will search for Harry… But if he continued to trust Snape, this could be months away. And even if by some miracle he did find out, how could he know where Harry was held? Perhaps that was the whole reason behind choosing this place. Azkaban was too obvious. Uncertainty was better when fleeing the wrath of a Dark Lord.

"Please think about me," Harry whispered, not caring that his captors might be listening. And they did since, not long after, steps echoed and the dreaded figure of Dumbledore inched closer to the bars. Coldness was in both their gazes and Harry nearly averted his eyes when the old man threw something right at his feet.

Half-melted and gray, and terribly empty. The diadem was now just another piece of trash. Crushing misery spread like a green vine, sinking its roots into Harry's flesh. The sense of loss physically hurt. It was done, it was gone, it was over. He had lost.

"Harry… what you did was a terrible, terrible thing," Dumbledore was saying to anybody who may be listening. Harry did not answer, breathing through his mouth, *not crying.* Their soul laid shattered at his feet and the fool was still babbling, as if Harry's world was not one step closer to its end. "—you did yet we destroyed it. Your horcrux is no more but your crimes still are. Harry, I deeply care about you and it's precisely because of this that I cannot hide the blood you've spilled. Your punishment is—"

Destroyed *his* horcrux? Harry blinked tears away while Dumbledore trailed on and on about trials and prison and rehabilitation and second chances. *His* horcrux? It made no sense at first but then it settled. They believed the diadem had been Harry's horcrux. So very wrong this assumption was, so far stretched it almost snapped in pieces. And Harry… Harry remained silent while Dumbledore painted the future in bright colours, as always, not asking for permission. Harry still didn't comprehend how to process the information. Their stupidity and confusion should offer joy but the fact still remained. Voldemort had lost yet another horcrux.

"I blame myself for your weakness."

"Good. I blame you too." So much resentment in Harry's voice.

"Harry," Dumbledore pleaded, dying hand settling on the bars. "I wronged you yet again. I disappointed yet another person I care about. It has become a talent of mine, you know? Turned my back on you when I should have been there to answer your questions, to offer love and support. A failure on my part, I confess, but… this does not offer absolution to your

wrongdoings. A great number of people are suffering but they do not run to their parents' killer. And the horcrux? Harry… the boy I held in my arms when he was a baby, who has tainted himself so and consumed another human… Who has shut his eyes to all that is good and just and turned the other way. Not even once have you thought of turning back to us? To the people who truly love you? Even now, when faced with your failure?"

"I have nothing to apologise for. Go back? Repent?" Harry shook his head, fury boiling in his veins with each word that left Dumbledore's mouth. "Go back to what? Repent for what? How very pointless. It's too late for any of that. If I go back now, I throw aside all my suffering as if it was nothing. I — No, I can't let it end this way… I just… continue on the same road, no matter the destination. Is death the end? I don't know. But I'll never turn my back on my very soul."

Sadness swam in those blue eyes. "Do you think Voldemort will do the same for you?" came the question.

"Are you asking if he can live without me? Because we both know the answer to that. Literally and figuratively."

"Harry… Tom kindly gifted the necessary means of destroying your own life. And you acted on it without a single question."

Was there any point to this conversation? Nonetheless, Harry would be punished according to his will. Forced to listen to the wise Albus Dumbledore who held the absolute truth now and forever. How Harry had done all wrong, how he was weak, how Voldemort was playing him, how Harry was a fool who was to pay for his foolishness. No one, least of all Albus Dumbledore, could hope to understand the two of them. Perhaps not today, perhaps not tomorrow, perhaps not even months away… but Voldemort would find him. He would not rest until Harry was back in his arms, laying waste to all who had dared separate them. Who will be killed first? Snape or Dumbledore? Whatever the answer, he and Voldemort would never let go of each other.

"I've devoured human flesh, I've killed, I've deceived you all, so don't presume to know me or my choices. I've engaged in terrible and great things… there's nothing I wouldn't do anymore. Absolutely nothing. So kill me, punish me, torture me, but shut the fuck up and leave me the hell alone."

There was a desperate kind of quiet after his words. And finally, *finally*, Dumbledore looked just as defeated as Harry with tears in his eyes. Mighty Albus Dumbledore, on the verge of crying. How proud of Harry Voldemort would be! A hollow breach was being dug between him and the headmasters. Both spoke yet the message never truly reached its destination. Only empty sounds and desolation. Strangers would be kinder to one another. And Harry… Harry had more than enough trust in himself and in Voldemort to stand his ground and speak back. He was proud of who he was, of all the things he had learned and did. Of his supposed wickedness and his strength. And he would be so even after Dumbledore and his false wisdom died with him.

Harry began to patiently stare at the wall, waiting for the man to leave.

“This is one of the the saddest images I ever witnessed,” Dumbledore confessed, statement like a goodbye.

But what about Harry? What about his sadness? How keen everyone was to ignore it. The splintered horcrux was at his feet and, once again, he was alone. At least Harry was at peace with himself. Living, waiting, obeying. For now. But then would come Voldemort and revenge. The Dark Lord always got what he wanted in the end. And oh, did he want Harry. This promise was enough for now.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

beta by the amazing Vanillaghost

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neville wasn't stupid. At times a coward, but never stupid. Not even if Professor Snape had said so in front of the class multiple times. Professor Dumbledore was much kinder, yet it was just as clear to Neville that he didn't rise up to his expectations. The shoes were much too big to fill. Being the Chosen One felt like a weight dragging him down by his neck. How had Harry done it? He supposed he had all of his life to get used to it, Neville answered his own question. And if not his entire life, at least whole years. Not months, like Neville had.

Outside rain fell and had continued to fall since last night. It lay waste to the pretty piles of snow soon to be mud as their group returned to Hogwarts. Their little trip to Hogsmeade had been cut short by the front page of the Daily Prophet while they had their late breakfast in The Three Broomsticks. And if there had been previous speculations on Harry's whereabouts — the most popular theory being that he was away on some secret business with Albus Dumbledore — now they had their answer, or at least an attempt at one.

The Boy Who Lived to be on trial for murder and practicing black magic. Read more on page 2.

The picture below the headline portrayed a grave-looking Dumbledore responding to the never-ending questions of a faceless reporter, presumably Rita Skeeter. There was not a single snapshot of Harry's face.

It had to be a misunderstanding, they all agreed in a heartbeat. This was Harry! Their Harry! And Neville would have totally been on the same page as them if not for the… Well, as he said before; he was not stupid. Since last summer, Harry had changed. You had to be blind not to notice. And Neville had noticed. How Harry sometimes looked as if he dreaded to be in their presence. As if they were not friends in the first place and they were bothering him on his way to something greater. Then he would smile, change the subject, and it was all forgotten. Until the next time, that was. Neville had briefly considered bringing this peculiar behavior to professor Dumbledore's attention early that year but finally decided not to. It did

not concern him. And besides, Harry may be having some bad days back home with his muggle relatives. Or perhaps You-Know-Who was back with the nightmares… In that case, Harry had all the right in the world to act angsty.

But murder and practising black magic? Dare it be real? Neville's heart would stick to a categoric '*No*' but his rationality and his faith in Dumbledore said otherwise. It was *Albus Dumbledore*, after all. And Harry… There was something wrong with him after all, it seemed.

Neville decided to keep these convictions to himself as not even he was sure if he believed Harry to be guilty or not. The rest of the group, however, had an entirely different opinion.

"They're not really going to send Harry to Azkaban, are they?!" Ron nearly shouted in order to be heard over the heavy rain. "This must be… I don't know, something else! You-Know-Who's plan, or a clever way to end this war… It has to be!"

Their wands were wielded like umbrellas yet water nonetheless invaded their shoes. At least it did Neville's, but he kept quiet about it.

The thought that the whole arrest and trial may be some kind of elaborate plan to lure out You-Know-Who had passed his mind but it did not fit the bigger picture. Harry had an obvious status in society, so not even if the supposed plan worked could they hope his reputation would be cleaned. Public opinion was already tricky to deal with and Dumbledore would be tactless to choose this specific approach. So unfortunately, the alternative left nothing to the imagination.

Harry was guilty.

His friend had used the same magic that had parted Neville from his parents. It was nightmarish, and a tremor that had nothing to do with the rain shook him. Why had Harry done such thing? Surely it was not of his own free will. No, You-Know-Who must be at fault. Neville had seen the way Harry had gazed at his boggart while the rest of the class raised eyebrows at the handsome man before their eyes. Harry had looked at the creature as if there was no one else in the room, so deeply as if… as if the monster had all the answers to his questions. And in Harry's green eyes there was a feeling Neville knew all too well; loneliness. A terrible, terrible loneliness. All aimed at You-Know-Who. It was oddly fitting for this to be his fault as well — everything Harry was *was* because of Lord… because of *Him*. Merlin, how wrong that sounded!

Neville's left shoe was completely flooded by the time he caught a glimpse of *Him*.

His living nightmare was leaning against a streetlamp, eyes on Neville, nonchalantly waiting. Neville's legs wobbled and he almost dropped his wand, rain splashing over his face, concerned voices calling out to him. *Are you alright? Are you feeling sick? Neville?* But You-Know-Who's gaze was like a sharp needle as he marched towards the small group. *No, no, no* —

Yet Neville's mouth remained locked, and in the end he couldn't even scream. His lips would not part.

* * *

Harry was dreaming, and for once it was not a nightmare but a pleasant dream. One of Voldemort.

There was broad daylight, the sun shining bright on them together by the lake. They were not on the green grass this time but resting atop the snow. Somehow, they were not freezing. Harry sat on the coldness while Voldemort's head laid in his lap with Harry's fingers threading through his hair, nails scraping at his lover's scalp like a habit. Grey eyes blinked up at him, obviously satisfied. Maybe they were talking about something in particular… maybe not. Harry couldn't recall.

What he actually remembered was the sudden way Voldemort had captured both of his hands and proceeded to interlock their fingers. Then he kissed all ten of them while holding Harry's gaze, a fiery want glimmering in those grey orbs. "I'll save you," dream-Voldemort had promised.

Then Harry had awoken, blinking at the ceiling. It was still night, or perhaps early morning… Either way, it was dark outside.

I' ll save you.

Was that his own imagination or had Voldemort managed to finally pierce the forged gates of Harry's consciousness? Because if that was the case, his lover had found out about his imprisonment. For a moment Harry imagined some spectacular scenario where one of Voldemort's spies in the Order (besides Snape) had found out about his situation and ran to Voldemort to tell the tale…

But then he remembered all the rubbish Dumbledore had spouted about second chances and a trial. Could he have been serious? Would they really orchestrate, of all things, a trial for him? Could they be that stupid? Announce it to the whole world and have it scribbled in all the papers? It should be obvious that Voldemort would come. It wasn't as if the Dark Lord did not read newspapers.

Then Harry realized he was the biggest fool of all.

Yes, it was obvious because they *wanted* to be obvious. Because they wanted Voldemort to arrive at his trial! Dumbledore and Snape had some kind of trap in store. But his lover was way smarter — surely he had already understood the situation and the awaited surprise. He'll know not to…

Harry's heart teetered.

I' ll save you.

The Dark Lord loved him and would not stand back as they sentenced Harry. Not even if the courtroom was filled with a thousands Aurors and, not one but *three,* Dumbledores. Voldemort would come.

Harry inhaled, head between his knees and back against the wall. *Please stay where you are*, he willed his thoughts to reach Voldemort. *They want you to be here, they'll wait for you, so please don't come. I'm safe. They won't kill me, just lock me up somewhere… You'll find out and then come up with a plan, rescue me, and it'll all be fine. We'll be together again so just stay where you are, don't play their game, don't come to the trial. Please.*

Perhaps Harry was only talking to himself but he still hoped.

"Please, Tom, please," he spoke aloud, somehow hoping their weight would double, triple, and that Voldemort would be able to hear. Perhaps he'll know Harry had used his given name and be furious about it. Harry smiled at the thought.

But his faint whispers only met his own ears. Harry stilled both his limbs and his breathing, listening for a response, but got none. If he were to start hitting the walls, Harry wouldn't be alone for much longer… so he refrained. Company was not desired and anger would only burden him further. It did not matter, the cards were already dealt. Harry would play their game until his first chance at freedom arrived. Or until Voldemort did, hopefully safe and sound. That was the plan so far.

Harry got little sleep that night and the nights to come.

Fear would not let him rest. And when fear decided to take its leave, worry came to visit. Worry about his own fate, about Voldemort, about the remaining horcruxes. Obviously their specific number was an unknown variable to Harry, yet one thing was clear. Another had been destroyed. First the diary, then the ring, now the diadem. Three parts of Voldemort's soul had perished. Now Harry really felt like hitting walls.

The food arrived three times a day, brought by a house elf who did not reply to anything Harry said. Not to his 'thank you', not to 'where are we', not even to 'tell Snape that Lord Voldemort will tear him to fucking pieces'. The round eyes only grew bigger at that before the creature would vanish with a *pop*. Harry hoped the slimy git would be noted of his exact words. *Damn him!* Yes, Voldemort would kill him, but if Harry could get to him first… well, the traitorous scum was bound to regret every decision he ever made that brought this specific outcome. And Harry was bound to enjoy every second of it.

For a moment Harry wondered what reaction they would have if he were to announce he was fucking Lord Voldemort. Right now, if Harry were to say that specific sentence. Enjoyment spread within him but he knew it wasn't worth it. Sure, their shock and revulsion would be hilarious but it would prove difficult for him in the long run. Besides, the last thing Harry needed was a question at his trial that sounded like *'Mister Potter, have you had sexual intercourse with You-Know-Who of your own free will or did he force you?'* Yes, that was the kind of circus he did not intend to participate in. Nonetheless, the thought remained entertaining.

Judging by the meals, five days had passed when they came for him. Alastor Moody and three other unknown Aurors, and of course Dumbledore and Snape who kept their distance as if Harry was infected with all the diseases in the world. Were they that scared of him? Good to know. Harry was an immortal being who now had a grudge and a lot of time to see to it. *They should be scared.*

“I can walk just fine on my own,” Harry spoke when they made to grab his arms.

Like an oversized bat, Snape approached. “Are you certain? Shouldn’t we call the Dark Lord for aid?” he articulated.

Harry imagined himself like in a slow-motion movie; of somehow managing to lunge at Dumbledore and twist his wand away from his stick-like fingers before a green light flew towards a dumb-looking Snape. Not the killing curse, no. That would be far too painless, far too easy. Harry craved blood and terrified screams. He wanted pain, Snape’s shrieks echoing in the empty space of the cells. And oh, the look on Dumbledore’s face amidst it all would be priceless. The shock and stupefaction as tiny drops of blood flew from Snape’s body like colorful confetti… well, more like a waterfall. But still.

With a sigh, Harry let go of the attractive fantasy. “Careful now. Then again, for you it’ll end in torture no matter what you say or do. So go on, you worthless piece of shit. Insult me.”

If not for Dumbledore’s warning hand on Snape’s shoulder, the traitor would have surely hit Harry straight in the face.

So on they went. And to Harry's immense surprise, at the end of the corridor the familiar halls of the Ministry awaited. *He had been imprisoned at the Ministry all this time. Clever.* Harry blinked at the few people before him who made a point of not looking him directly in the eye. But oh, how they stared. It could only mean they knew, that Dumbledore had talked about his crimes and made this a public affair like none other before. In absolute silence, Harry was escorted to the courtroom.

Inside the vast space of the Wizengamot cameras flashed and the bright hair of Rita Skeeter glimmered among the blinding lights. Her faithful quill was already scribbling. The other individuals belonging to the press were in quite a frenzy, undoubtedly fantasising about headlines for their future articles. ‘*The Boy Who Lived Charged With Murder’*. The horror.

The place did not differ from a year ago, not in terms of setting or people. There were a few familiar faces in the courtroom and the rest complete strangers, just like the time with the Dementors.

When Moody took his leave after escorting Harry to the assigned wooden chair, Harry caught sight of none other than Umbridge herself three rows in front of him. Her attention had already been on Harry. She gave him a vicious smile and then an elder colleague demanded her attention with a tap on her shoulder. Conversations buzzed and echoed up to the tall glass ceiling.

Harry made a point of staring into nothingness with a blank expression when Dumbledore and Snape appeared in his line of vision to take their assigned places and he subconsciously

narrowed his eyes at the pair. How eager they must be for this cheap show. No one from school was there, student or professor. It seemed Harry's trial only allowed for special attendance, like a V.I.P. pass. Or maybe it was just to avoid the predictable chaos more people would inevitably bring. Whatever the case, it had no importance, Harry decided, as he drummed his fingernails against the wooden chair.

As if on cue, Rufus Scrimgeour took the stand. Or maybe he only did so because he minded the noise. "The trial of Harry James Potter begins," the Minister said, and then addressed Harry directly. Apparently not wasting any time with grand speeches. The approach was unfamiliar to Harry. "You stand accused of murder and practising black magic. How do you answer to these charges, Mister Potter?"

For real, what was he supposed to do? Tell the truth and go to Azkaban? Or lie and eventually go to Azkaban as well? Cheap show indeed.

"I'm innocent," Harry lied.

A few murmurs and then silence.

"Mister Potter, these accusations against you have been presented by Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore. You are provided a chance to speak your mind before we move on to the evidence."

It passed Harry's mind to let Dumbledore have the stage and be done with it but then decided against that. As he was going down anyway, he may as well go down in style and drag another down with him where possible.

Harry cleared his throat and sought Dumbledore's eyes. "I'm not the Chosen One." The quiet was disturbed once again. "I mean, I *was*… until a year ago. When Albus Dumbledore decided I had not done my job well enough and Lord Voldemort still lived." Harry allowed the words to sink in before he went on. "Now you have brought me here based on what? His word? But why does his word hold so much value when he has lied all this time? To me, to you. Dumbledore knew about the prophecy concerning the Dark Lord and a boy — perhaps two, but we'll get to that in a minute… '*The Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not*'… This prophecy made by Sybill Trelawney, in his very presence, has been kept a secret all this time. Yes, a prophecy. Why else would the Dark Lord have chosen to kill an innocent toddler who had no relation to him whatsoever? But since I did not die, all of a sudden I was given the divine mission of vanquishing the greatest dark wizard of all time. When I failed to achieve that, Albus Dumbledore decided Lord Voldemort had chosen wrong and that Neville Longbottom is the actual Chosen One. But what was he supposed to do with the old, useless one? With Harry James Potter who failed to kill the Dark Lord? Well, we're here for this, aren't we?"

Scrimgeour's gaze was calculated, Dumbledore appeared unaffected by having one of his many secrets exposed, and Snape's sneer almost reached his ears. The enchanted quill of Rita Skeeter furiously scrawled in the background.

"Mister Potter," Umbridge sweetly intruded, leaning forwards in her seat for intimidation purposes. "Perhaps the words were too difficult for you to comprehend. Allow me to

rephrase. Our Minister asked you how you plead. Guilty or not? Do please answer."

"Innocent. I thought my difficult words would have been understood easily enough by someone of your intellect. Perhaps I was wrong."

And now Umbridge had added herself to the list of people who burned with the need to hit him, right beside Snape. Her face borrowed the most wonderful shade of pink from her clothing, only a few tones lighter.

Scrimgeour finally decided the discussion had taken a wrong turn. "Thank you, Mister Potter." Then he turned and nodded at Dumbledore. "You have the next word."

Now all eyes were on the old man who stood, his back only a few feet from Harry.

"Thank you, Minister. Now I will have to begin by admitting young Harry is *partially* correct. I had a certain amount of knowledge regarding the prophecy and I did choose to maintain the secret. But not because of any ulterior motives, as he implied, but because of his very safety. To make sure he would not be hunted by the remaining loyalists of Lord Voldemort."

Harry watched him, already knowing where this was going. His fingers were about to resume their drumming when he caught sight of Lucius Malfoy slithering inside the courtroom and taking his seat in the same row as Umbridge, right at Scrimgeour's side. He met Harry's eyes but nothing could be read there. As discreetly as he could manage, Harry scrutinised the enormous hall. Searching for a familiar figure, for the raw power that seemed not to be present. His breath eased. Just because Malfoy was here, it did not mean Voldemort would be as well. The blond must have been sent to observe the trial and report the events to the Dark Lord. Yes, everything was good. It had to be.

In the meantime, Dumbledore faced Harry. "Harry, my boy," he continued, gaze soft. "It seems you fell in love with a legend. I am most sure that besides the error of calling Lord Voldemort the greatest wizard of all time, your opinion proves an obvious sign of appreciation. But as you already used half-truths, I merely beg you do it well and measure your words." Harry's nails scrapped against the arms of the chair as Dumbledore's attention left him, turning to his breathless audience; a bunch of morons. "I do not wish to bring Mister Potter any harm even if he had harmed other innocent lives. But unfortunately, great mistakes have been made and Lord Voldemort played him well. To clarify, I do not seek a death sentence or life imprisonment, but a crime remains a crime. No matter who commits it, the punishment must follow. That is justice."

There were murmurs of agreement from the vast majority of the public.

"Now to clarify what Harry has done. Most of you are not familiar with what a horcrux is… It is a most vile branch of magic that allows one to keep on living even after the body is destroyed, by splitting his or her soul and hiding it inside an object. Severus Snape and I had obliterated Harry's own and the object is already in your custody awaiting inspection. But what I desire to talk about is how one goes about splitting his or her soul. It is by murder… and unfortunately, not only murder. Heinous acts of cannibalism are involved in the ritual." Revulsion flooded the courtroom and Harry had a foul taste in his mouth. *Not because of the*

memory but because of the sheer audacity they had to talk about that part of Harry's life. And yet, he had been expecting this approach. "And now I ask you all, can we ignore these abominable actions of The Boy Who Lived?"

"You have no evidence, no way of provi—"

"Oh, but I do," Dumbledore interrupted, no twinkle in his blue eyes. No satisfaction either. "Why not make use of the Veritaserum?"

The righteous bastard.

Harry froze while everyone watched, obviously enthralled with the idea. He saw Lucius lean in to whisper into Scrimgeour's ear but there was little Malfoy and his influence could achieve at this point. The bait had been thrown and this… this was not in the plan. If they used Veritaserum and asked all the right questions, they may find out everything and then some. That *Voldemort's* horcrux had been the one destroyed, all their plans and their secret meetings… their bond, *everything*. And Harry could not do a single thing to put an end to it. He was trapped.

As people began talking and Scrimgeour attempted to settle them, a door opened and steps echoed against the marble floors and down the stairs to where Harry was. Silence had fallen and everyone craned their necks to catch sight of the proud man strolling between their seats.

Lord Voldemort himself locked eyes with Harry as he advanced, utterly alone and in the old fool's direction. He was the only person besides Dumbledore who was standing. People watched with sheer curiosity at this man who dared interrupt such critical affairs. They didn't know who he was but they had eyes and their bodies thrummed with his magic. Voldemort's stature, his face, the power he radiated by simply breathing, his confidence… He was recognised as a menace.

And he and Harry were looking at each other through all these people. *I'll save you*, those grey eyes promised, like a fragment from a dream.

"What is the meaning of this?" The Minister demanded in a harsh tone while Malfoy sat a bit straighter in his seat, now *awfully* interested.

"I am Lord Voldemort," Harry's lover proudly said. "And I've come for my Chosen One."

A few shouts erupted and cameras flashed as people stepped on each other on their way out. A few wands raised, yet there was mostly panic. Chaos erupted as Dumbledore drew his wand — but on Harry, not Voldemort. Harry jumped from the chair to dodge yet there was no spark left after the spell, only a translucent veil separating him from the rest of the courtroom. His lover's own wand had already been raised but whatever the harm, it had already been done.

Harry made to go near the enchanted wall and probe at it when Voldemort sent a vicious spell that collided with the veil and did absolutely nothing. A moment later, Harry understood the purpose of this spell.

Harry was yanked back into a firm chest as a wand painfully dug into the side of his neck. "You'll want to stay very still," Snape viciously advised as Harry thrashed in his hold. "Voldemort, now I speak directly to you."

The few people left were watching the tense exchange while Voldemort had eyes only for Harry.

"This ends here, no—"

"You cannot harm him," the Dark Lord smirked, inching nearer the veil only to have Dumbledore cut him off. The line of Voldemort's shoulders stiffened even further though he ignored the headmaster's presence. "Such short memory you have… But as a merciful Lord, I shall remind you. '*Will you protect Harry from Albus Dumbledore and those who raise their wands to him even at the cost of your life?'* These are the exact same words of your Unbreakable Vow made not too long ago."

Snape's wand was pressed impossibly tight into Harry's neck while nails dug into his upper arm, keeping him in place. Fear spread inside Harry but, against all odds, Voldemort was here and not even once gazing away from him. Not even though Dumbledore stood before him and Aurors may be on their way. Voldemort would save Harry and in a few moments Harry would be in his arms with the Dark Lord's face pressed into his neck, not Snape's damn wand. *I'll save you*, Voldemort had promised, and Harry trusted him more than anything. Trusted the one person who had never lied to him, the one person who loved him enough to risk everything by being here.

I love you, Harry mouthed at his handsome lover with a smile, and Voldemort… Voldemort's eyes said 'I love you too', even though his mouth would never utter those words.

"Yes, I said it. I promised you and I do remember. But you, in your vast arrogance… you made a costly mistake. Perhaps the gravest of your life. My Lord, I see you remember my words, but do you really understand their meaning? Those who raise their *wands* to him. But, my Lord, I do not intend to raise any wand," Snape said, oozing satisfaction. "Your human horcrux is mortal once again, so know this… This is not revenge. This is justice."

"Albus, stand aside," Voldemort said, when the wand at Harry's neck retreated and all present understood what was to follow.

Dumbledore, of course, did not.

And Harry had grasped Snape's meaning but he did not expect what came next. He witnessed Voldemort throw curses at Dumbledore in his rush to get to the enchanted veil and Harry. Then Harry was suddenly on his knees, a hand painfully taking hold of his hair as his neck was arched. He caught sight of the glass ceiling of the courtroom and the light of the afternoon sky, heard the traitor's shallow breathing in his ears and the duel taking place mere steps away from him. Then the ache of his scalp intensified as if in warning, and Snape smashed Harry's forehead against the floor.

The impact instantly made Harry dizzy, all sounds fading as if the volume had been turned off on the tv. His neck must have been craned since he saw once again the glass ceiling, and

then another smash of his head collided with the ground.

There was no real perception of hurt or pain because Harry couldn't feel his body, yet he could not see either… There was something invading his eyes and preventing him from seeing. It dripped down his face like tears, tears that Harry was unable to wipe away as his body had a mind of his own, convulsing.

As if coming from underwater, Harry heard someone scream his name. A familiar voice… *Tom*. His Tom was calling to him. His soul must have waited for an answer that would never come. At least he knew Harry loved him.

The last time Harry was twisted back, he glimpsed only black and then the final bang came. A bang so loud that it clattered his very bones and Tom's voice did not reach him anymore.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

beta by the amazing Vanillaghost whom I thank for all the help with all my heart:)

Severus let go of the limp corpse and Voldemort lost his mind. With a scream that froze the blood in Severus' veins, the monster charged at both the enchanted veil and Dumbledore. This show of strength and desperation left Severus cold. Win or lose, in the end Potter was still dead at his feet. A new kind of defeat for the Dark Lord to experience. And oh, the anger in Voldemort's movements; gone was his elegance and cold calculation, and replaced by desperation to reach the boy. Did losing your soul hurt this badly?

Potter lay with his face down, blood and tiny bits of flesh underneath him in a grotesque display of justice. To his disgust, Severus noticed his right hand was smeared with the same repulsive matter and with a flick of his wrist the dirt vanished.

Only Lucius and the woman, Rita Skeeter, had remained inside the courtroom, half hidden behind a bench yet still there. Both to watch and one to tell the story. In the meantime, Dumbledore was losing. Some part of Severus wasn't even surprised. The storm that was Lord Voldemort demanded blood and Albus stood in his way to the boy. The dead boy… *Lily's boy*.

The boy who was also a traitor.

Severus turned his back on the duel and walked away, leaving the safety that was the veil. If Voldemort made to strike at him, Severus did not know. It seemed Dumbledore had not yet fallen. He went on, Disapparating as soon as he reached the main corridor that still swarmed with people, all frightened to the core and whispering *You-Know-Who… Harry Potter… You-Know-Who*. One lost, one dead, one a step closer to mortality.

But in the end both parts had lost, had they not? He and Albus, the Dark Lord and Potter. They had lost this war but Lord Voldemort had lost his precious soul and what was left of his sanity. Severus wondered what the monster was thinking. Had the price paid been too high? Did he consider this act a victory or a defeat? Where did one end and the other begin?

The place Severus found himself in was neither his house nor Hogwarts. Instead it was ruins clad in snow that met his eyes and Severus' heart cracked. "I've killed your son," he whispered in front of what was left of Lily's home. And the strangest thing was that tears left his eyes.

* * *

The few people gathered were stiff with dread. But Lucius most of all. He had been there, inside that place. Had seen the way the Dark Lord had fell to his knees in front of Potter's body, the corpse of Albus Dumbledore close enough to step on. And Merlin, how Voldemort had held the boy in his arms, how he had buried his head into his neck. All that blood glued to the Dark Lord's skin and clothing… The minutes he simply held Potter had seemed an eternity and then his Lord had stood, disfigured corpse still in his arms, and looked down at him as he walked out of the Ministry. As if… as if he loved the boy.

It reminded Lucius of the way he himself stared at his wife, which was a disturbing parallel of the most ludicrous kind.

Twelve hours of silence had followed the incident at the Ministry, which had only been broken a while ago. They had been summoned to the usual meeting chamber where, to their surprise, they had not found the Dark Lord but *Neville Longbottom* guarded by Nagini. The young boy's eyes had gone round at the sight of them but remained where he was, near the window, far away from the immense snake lying on the table as if it belong there.

They had remained standing as well.

"He's Draco's classmate," Narcissa whispered into Lucius' ear, hand on his arm. "Frank and Alice's child."

"I know. The other Chosen One."

To Lucius, the boy's fate was already sealed. So there was no point in becoming involved in personal details. The boy wasn't here for nothing.

A few more minutes of tense stares and quiet exchanges passed as they waited for the Dark Lord. The atmosphere should have been a joyous one by any means. Albus Dumbledore was finally dead and rotting, the balance had irreversibly tipped in their favour, but… their Lord's obsession was dead and his ability to get over it was debatable at best. Even Bellatrix was not her usual cruel self in spite of having Neville Longbottom so near her. You'd think it would bring back memories.

Severus' betrayal contributed to the general uneasiness as well. He had butchered Potter in front of their Lord's eyes. When he was going to be found, because eventually he *was* going to be found, Lucius dared not fathom the savagery of his punishment that would be served by the Dark Lord's hands.

Nagini slithered off the table and Lord Voldemort made his entrance.

There was no smugness on the face of their Lord. He stood as straight as ever, his pose immaculate, yet the exhaustion was plain to see on his face and in the dark circles underneath his eyes. He did not pass a single glance to anyone as he sat, and they hurried to follow his example. Lucius and Narcissa exchanged a knowing look. *Suffering*. But this particular emotion was entirely alien to its current subject.

“I want Severus Snape found and brought to me,” the Dark Lord ordered, not wasting time with pleasantries. “Alive. Bellatrix, Dolohov, Greyback… I do not wish to see your faces until you return with him.”

“My Lord,” Dolohov began with unease and everyone held their breaths. “With all due respect… Severus Snape is a powerful and talented individual. He is not stupid either and we do not have any clues or leads just yet. Maybe it’ll be better to wait and—”

“Do as I ordered and keep your comments to yourself!” Voldemort abruptly hissed, eyes sparkling with malice while Dolohov blinked in confusion and the Longbottom boy flinched in the background. “Are all those years I’ve spent training you nothing but a waste if three individuals cannot find one? This is how useless you are? Find him, you incompetent fool!”

The Dark Lord stood up and everyone winced. And yet it seemed Dolohov still had a death wish, stubbornness clear on his face.

“But my Lord, Severus may be—”

“Get out of my fucking sight this instant!” The Dark Lord roared and Dolohov almost fell off his chair in his hurry to leave the chamber, finally catching up with his predicament.

Poor idiot, thought Lucius. Talking back to Lord Voldemort, especially in this state… If Dolohov had not been impeccable in his assignment in the past, Nagini would have already swallowed his warm corpse by now.

The rest of them waited, none daring to speak and further anger the man. The Dark Lord was seething, hands on the table, staring down at it in blind fury. Then he straightened with obvious purpose and sent a wandless spell that brought the Longbottom boy to his knees with a painful sound that echoed in the silent room. Predatorily, the prisoner was approached.

They all watched Voldemort as he kneeled in front of a quivering Neville, expression reverted back to a terrifying, fake calmness.

“The child of the prophecy. Apologies for making you wait. It is such an honor, my Chosen One… No, how wrong it tastes on my tongue. There is only one worthy of such a title.”

“Harry,” Longbottom finished, holding the man’s gaze.

“My Harry,” nodded the Dark Lord. “My precious Harry whose worth is immeasurable. Who is to me what air is to you. You were acquaintances, from what I heard.”

Not friends.

“Yes, we — we were. What happened to him? Where is Harry? What have you done to him?”

“Me?” Sharp eyes rose and flashed to their small group before focusing yet again on Neville. “The precious corpse by the name of Albus Dumbledore hadn’t told you this part, had he? Then listen. The story goes like this… Harry was under my protection from the Order, from Dumbledore, from everyone who wished him harm. *Harry was mine*. Severus Snape was magically bound to ensure his safety in more than words. Then at Harry’s laughing stock of a trial I ran to his safety. But they were expecting me. Set a fine trap, ready to kill two birds with one stone. And they were ready with wards, Dumbledore, and *muggle* ways.” The Dark Lord’s tone grew in intensity, eyes blazing. “I, Lord Voldemort, could not even step close to Harry, let alone touch him. It was not pretty. Spells flew and in the end your Defence professor had my Harry with a wand against his throat while Dumbledore stood in my way. You know what happened next? Severus took Harry’s pretty little head in his hands…” Voldemort’s palms crept over Neville’s cheeks like spider’s legs. “And smashed it against the floor of the Ministry until my mark on his forehead lost itself in all that red.”

Voldemort’s face contorted with all the hate creeping into his body, tiny bloody marks emerging on the boy’s face where nails pressed into flesh.

“Is this what you’re going to do to me?” Neville let out with wide eyes, wincing in pain, and displaying a hollow bravado of courage soon to be broken open wide and splintered.

“No, boy. Worse. It will be ten — no, a *thousand times worse.* Let everyone see what happens when Lord Voldemort is crossed. When they take my heart away from me.”

Every soul in the world would have to recognize Lord Voldemort as the blackest and most dreadful among them. The greatest too, as Albus Dumbledore could speak no more.

Lucius felt his wife’s hand seek his. Narcissa and her fingers were steady, both silently glad Draco was not here to witness this massacre. The instant the screaming began, Lucius’ heart filled with pity for the doomed boy. Because it was just an unlucky boy caught in the wrong tale with the wrong characters. The Dark Lord used no wand, the marble floor of the manor steadily adjusting its color and *oh, the sounds*.

At some point Neville ceased praying for his Lord to stop. Or perhaps he simply could not speak with a broken mouth and punctured lips barely attached to his skull.

Soon the house elves were summoned to clean up.

* * *

His Harry resembled a doll once again and Voldemort was reminded by yet another muggle fairytale. Not *Beauty and the Beast,* but instead *Sleeping Beauty*. Because Harry most

certainly was a beauty and undoubtedly asleep in Voldemort's bed where he rightfully belonged. For the Dark Lord would not have let something as petty as *death* part him and his Harry.

All wounds had been erased, he had seen to it. He had brought Harry's flawless skin back to life underneath his fingers, brought him back to the land of the living and gifted him the piece of his soul that had rested inside Voldemort's chest where it was kept it safe. A kiss was offered but Harry remained dormant, leaving Voldemort to obsessively watch the rise and fall of Harry's chest for a long, long time. For days. Days in which he could do nothing but be with Harry. If Voldemort were to walk away and see to his usual business, he would have gone mad with wrath. Nothing else seemed to matter. His heart would race as if high on magic and he would end up raising his voice even to his own house elf, his temper getting the best of him. Dealing with the incompetence of the likes of Dolohov would have undoubtedly ended up in a vicious manslaughter and severely reduced the number of his followers.

So Voldemort faithfully stood in a chair by the boy's bedside, holding onto a warm hand, offering praise for his own judgment in urging Harry to make a horcrux. *How right he had been*. Because if Harry had not… No, Voldemort would not offer a single thought to that nightmarish outcome, to that dream from which there was no awakening. Instead he secured his already tight hold on Harry's hand. *Instinct*.

"I'll gift you the world as long as you open your eyes."

Harry did not stir at his promise, and yet he had to…

And eventually he did. Perhaps minutes, perhaps an eternity later. Fingers clenched inside Voldemort's palm and bright green met his gaze.

"Tom?" His Harry finally managed to find his voice, one full of confusion but also of *life*.

"Yes," Voldemort said, answering to his given name for the very first time in quite a long while and kissing Harry's hand. "I've saved you."

"You did promise," Harry smiled, somewhat bewildered. "Are you a dream? Am I dreaming?"

Voldemort couldn't suppress an amused smirk. "No, my soul. No dream. You're here with me."

His soul didn't appear too convinced. Blinking, and as if to test this theory, Harry's other hand rose and poked Voldemort's cheek before he trailed a finger down to his chin, tapping at his lips. With furrowed brows, but still touching him, Harry blinked again.

"I think I had a dream… It hurt and then… I was in a dark place, like… like I was underwater and trying to reach the surface but then—"

"You died and I brought you back. You're here now, you're safe."

Voldemort's words must have brought back the memories because Harry's daze vanished and he threw himself into Voldemort's arms, breathing against his chest like a terrified child. Voldemort held his soul which no longer hosted his soul and everything was as it should be. Perfect. The two of them, together. Forever.

Harry did not let go for a long time. Neither one of them said a word and Voldemort understood. He was perhaps the only individual who did. The only one who had shared Harry's fate to a certain extent. Death was not so easy to forget once experienced; the desperation of your consciousness fighting to regain control and the clinging to oneself so as not to lose it. So much time passed in this state until one managed to seize sovereignty. Voldemort himself had spent years crawling through this grim fate. Victory had been acquired at the end of the road but Harry's story had not even reached its beginning. So he held the boy closer to his chest.

"I thought I was in hell," Harry whispered into the crook of his neck. "All alone. Without you."

"I'll never leave you again," Voldemort vowed, and meant every word. "You're here, safe, and you shall remain this way for eternity. Now look at me, my soul."

There was no hesitation in Harry's movements, only a slight tremble of limbs. Perhaps it was the fear or tiredness, or likely both. The two of them separated, but not entirely. Their fingers locked together.

"My soul, do you wish to exterminate him yourself or would you allow me the great honour?"

A shadow passed over Harry's face and his fingers twitched. There was no need to utter the name. In a way, this was Voldemort admitting he had been wrong.

"You may do the massacre but I must be the one to finish him off. After all, that's the first step in making a horcrux isn't it?"

Voldemort couldn't be more proud. "Your dedication is intimidating."

"So is your ruthlessness," Harry retorted with the ghost of a smile. He leaned back against the pillows and weakly tugged at Voldemort's hand like a child. With a raised eyebrow, Voldemort followed the boy's wish and let himself rest his head above Harry's heart, listening to its every beat. Voldemort's hair was being played with, nails scratching at his nape as if he was the one in need of solace, not Harry.

"If you refer to the action of seeing to my every need, then I confess to being ruthless. I find joy in this attribute, celebrating how nothing else matters besides what I want and need, time and time again — which has been *you*. My motive, my means, you've been both."

Harry took a deep breath underneath him and Voldemort felt it as if it were his own.

"You've been stupid by going to my trial but I cannot thank you enough for it. My heart leaped when our eyes met. I had more than hope, I had faith. In you, because you were there

and I knew everything would turn out fine. And somehow, in spite of it all, it did."

"I've killed them," Voldemort confessed, closing his eyes and hugging Harry's middle.

"Killed who?"

"Dumbledore and the other boy…. the supposed Chosen One. My blood boiled in my veins at their every breath."

Justification was not in his nature and yet… "Dumbledore, I understand and rejoice. But Neville… What for?"

"The old fool took you from me. I had to take something of his."

That was all the explanation that was needed. And for them, it proved more than enough.

Raising himself onto his elbows, Voldemort kissed the bridge of Harry's nose, then his forehead, then both of his cheeks. "I'll never fail us again."

Harry did not look away from his eyes. "I know."

Now, for just a little while, Voldemort could finally rest.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

beta by the amazing Vanillaghost whom I thank for all the help with all my heart:)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Drip, drip, drip — that was the sound his blood made as it painted the floor. The nightmare remained the same these days. Invisible weights pressed down on his chest, as did darkness, desperation, the feeling of being torn apart, all that red, and… *Him.* His voice, his hands, his fingers twisted in Harry's hair. Him. Perhaps Harry should simply go and ask for Voldemort's assistance with the dream. Yet… things were difficult. Harry had his nightmares and memories, and Voldemort had his quest for Snape's head. Harry made a conscious effort of not thinking about the man while awake yet his presence was a constant in the deepest corners of his mind. The blood, the steady hands, and the silent distress afterwards. Then Harry would awake and his lover would be absent from their bed…

Five days had passed since Harry lived again and the Dark Lord obsessively awaited for his three followers and their prize. None had yet to return and the anger doubled with each day Snape was not in front of his eyes. And Harry… Harry threw up in the bathroom each morning upon awakening, the taste of blood not leaving his mouth for all the water he swallowed or spat out. These were the only moments when he was thankful Voldemort was not with him. Playing at being okay was easier without the other man's presence.

"Master Harry. Master said he waits in your kingdom."

Harry thanked the confused house elf and headed for the lake without a second thought. Fresh air was as good a start as any.

The chilly weather warmed as he stepped inside their little paradise. Voldemort was already there at the round table in the grass. Two plates of breakfast awaited and Harry's stomach protested at the sight.

"You're pale." Voldemort studied him as he sat down. "Paler than usual. Are you feeling unwell?"

Shame washed over Harry. What use were lies between the two? He deserted his untouched plate and without a word he stood, took two steps around the table, and straddled Voldemort's lap. The arms of the chair made the whole act a little uncomfortable but steady hands around his waist kept Harry safe. *Voldemort would never allow him to fall down*. He held the Dark Lord close in return and Voldemort spoke, wet lips stained with coffee grazing Harry's neck.

“Tell me, my soul.”

“I can’t stop dreaming about… you know…. him. It’s horrible. But then I wake up and I’m sick and memories are flooding in. I forget for a few hours during the day, but at night… Again and again and again. I’m just tired. Scared.”

At first Voldemort remained silent, palms smoothing over Harry’s back as if he desired to map out every inch of him. In turn, Harry pressed fluttering kisses all across that handsome face while his fingers buried themselves in Voldemort’s hair, all of it familiar by now. He wouldn’t trade anything for this.

Voldemort’s hands came to rest on Harry’s cheeks and their eyes locked together. “I will fix this, fix you. Fix your mind, make you happy, kiss you all day long. Whatever you wish. I will do it, me. No one else but me.”

Harry nodded, full of eagerness. And by the lake, with Voldemort and himself so intertwined together, the Dark Lord fulfilled his promise. Harry opened his mind to him just as he opened his legs and Voldemort performed. Mending, pleasing, sealing those dark images away and forging the gates closed. Harry felt it as deep as he felt that cock thrusting inside him. Before it was over; bread, eggs, bacon and cutlery were sprawled across the summer grass with Harry on the table and Voldemort between his legs.

Shuddering, Harry reached for those lips. Yes, it appeared the Dark Lord truly intended to kiss him all day long. Perhaps all through the night too. Perhaps forever.

* * *

Beware of Lord Voldemort for he never deserts his obsessions. Albus had once said something along those lines in one of the many nights they discussed the Dark Lord. And how right he had been. Both in relation to the boy and Severus himself.

Now the monster had Potter’s corpse to cherish and obsess about and Severus’ own followed closely on the cursed list. And perhaps he should watch out for himself and his wellbeing as he was now temporarily shielded from the unimaginable torture that would soon arrive. But Severus could not bring himself to end his life.

And what a life it had been.

Here, in the ruins of Lily’s house, peace had been found. Lord Voldemort had no room between these walls, as crushed as some were. Severus rested on the floor in the very room she had died in, right beside what was left of Potter’s crib. If only the boy had never existed… no prophecy, no fixation of the Dark Lord’s to put an end to that worthless life.

What could have been? Snow descended from the wrecked ceiling and Severus abandoned the train of thought. It was all in the past filled with dead people. Her, Potter, the boy, Albus… and soon enough *himself*.

But he was still alive, and only because he desired it. So many possibilities lay ahead and yet Severus lingered here, waiting for the unavoidable. Yes, the unavoidable and agonizing death that was soon to occur. Or perhaps later, perhaps years away, years in which Severus technically could live his life, running away, leaving England, going to the other side of the earth. But all on borrowed time. Voldemort would never forgive Potter's murder and he would come. And if Severus had to bet, he would say sooner rather than later.

In a way, Severus himself had prolonged the inevitable by running away from the Ministry and from the Dark Lord's wrath. But he needed to be here one last time. Needed to feel Lily, needed to confess what he'd done. Needed peace. Would she understand the price paid? Her son's life for saving countless others? Severus didn't know, and in the end it didn't even make a difference. The boy was dead and rotting and life went on, people laughed and cried just the same. More important people than him had perished and it mattered not.

Now, the peril. Surprisingly enough, his visitors arrived in the morning, not late at night — entirely out of character. Perhaps they had watched him when the stars were still high in the sky and silently delivered the news to the Dark Lord while hiding in the shadows. Because who else could it be?

Severus remained seated as the human monster made his grand entrance with three more shadows trailing behind. Bellatrix, Dolohov, Greyback… Three rabid hounds following their master. Naturally, Voldemort was the one to break the silence after an uncomfortable stretch of time. *Always a show.*

"You did well. Now leave us," he ordered, not gazing away from Severus.

They did as told, stealing looks behind them; the last time they'd see an alive Severus Snape. The last time he would see them too. Strangely enough, he may miss the three just a little.

Now back to the Dark Lord, the living menace pinning him down with his gaze. Tall and grand, impressive in all sense of the word with his wand in his right hand. Not raised just yet, which made it all the more terrifying; a silent promise waiting for something monumental to take place. One, two, three steps over the rubble that had buried Lord Voldemort sixteen years ago. Severus watched and he was watched in turn. A game? The end?

"You lied to me. You betrayed me," the Dark Lord stated in a voice colder than winter. "And now you know what follows. Punishment."

"For someone so clever, it took you long enough to figure it out." Severus shrugged at his own bravado, not bothering to get up just yet. He'd die in a few moments just the same. But Voldemort's calm raised questions. This and the way he gawked at Severus. As if throttling him with his bare hands was on his mind.

"Don't speak, listen. Know that for Harry you will live longer than a moment. For him, for my soul, for my precious boy. Oh, I suppose you don't know…" The Dark Lord neared, the

floors creaking in response to his presence. “You imbeciles, you and the old dead cockroach turned the wrong horcrux to ashes, *my horcrux*. And you thought yourselves *clever*.”

It could not be denied that Severus’ whole world crashed. Failure. Utter and complete failure. The Dark Lord alive, Albus dead… the boy living, still immortal and a plague. And… it was over.

Finally, Severus lifted himself, sounds of protest echoing from his stiff bones. What a bitter end. “Still, I don’t regret any of it,” he declared. And it was a truth of the worst kind.

The monster’s eyes darkened in the morning light. Raising his chin, he looked at Severus who could not understand how, at some point in his life, he had admired and wished to serve this man. This abominable creature who thought himself above all. This Dark Lord who oozed such terror; of being dead, of torture, of watching your loved ones torn apart before your eyes. As if he was a being out of a horror story, the type who ate children. Lord Voldemort had done all these things and so much worse.

The Dark Lord slid off the winter scarf from around his neck. A dark thing, impossibly lengthy. There was no cruelty in his movements and yet… Severus knew.

The punch that followed knocked the air out of his lungs as blood filled the inside of his mouth. Then his chin crashed against the floor, splintering something in or around there. And still Voldemort peacefully wrapped the woolly material around Severus’ neck in a perfect noose. Distantly, he wondered where the man had learned such a muggle talent.

“Eyes wide open for my soul,” the Dark Lord instructed as Severus gasped for breath, neck seized in a vice grip. “By the time this is done you’ll wish you had never set a finger on my Harry. Now just gaze down, put on a nice show for him. After all these years in my service you should at least be able to achieve this much. And remember… scream as much as you wish, there’s no one listening. That is… if you’re able to.”

Their eyes locked together and Voldemort was a nightmare hungry for blood. The single spell he performed was to glue one end of the scarf around what was left of Potter’s crib, then a charm to secure its hold. Such wrath exhibited for such a mundane shove out of a window. Sharp glass cut Severus’ cheeks, his brows, his forehead. Then there was a snapping — everything snapped, and the pain… It was as if he was a puppet being hauled in all the wrong directions, limb from limb. That snap… it must have been his neck. But why wasn’t death knocking on his door? Why…

A solid weight appeared beneath the soles of his feet and Severus breathed again, and it was agony. A dull ache. Then hell again, as he fell once more. Falling, not falling, again and again. His neck snapped, again and again.

“Look at him,” Someone growled from above, the monster.

Breathless, Severus’ eyes left the blue sky and stared down, pressure crushing his windpipe. In front of Lily’s house, Harry Potter stood. In the end taking everything away from him, even peace. Haunting him of what might have been. A snap after another and a question

raised itself. Was the boy staring at him or the Dark Lord? In the cycle of freezing, dying, not dying, Severus thought only of that.

* * *

"You are forbidden."

Harry arched an eyebrow at Voldemort, waves crashing against Harry's bare feet where a palm lay over one of his ankles.

"Am I?"

Such power Harry possessed, to be able to splash the Dark Lord across his fancy clothes. Naturally, Voldemort could have prevented both the water and Harry's movement, if only he had wished for it. Instead he caged Harry against his chest, sweeping them both deeper into the sea, sand invading the space between Harry's toes and the insides of his lover's shoes. What else could they do but laugh?

It was the middle of February, they were somewhere in Albania and they could not refrain from keeping out of the water. Well, Harry couldn't. And Voldemort, of course, followed. No one else was here, banished either by the wind or the business of a Monday afternoon. The two had enough time. Back at home Lucius was in charge while Harry and Voldemort travelled around, far and away.

"You… are a menace to my attire," the Dark Lord said, smiling as he tucked strands of Harry's hair behind his ears.

Harry just hugged him harder, standing on his tiptoes. Rocking back and forth, hands seeking skin, they must have been quite a sight to anyone watching. At some point he craned his neck up, resting his chin on Voldemort's chest as he looked the man in the eye. If bigger hands weren't trapping his own at his back in a mock form of punishment, Harry would have touched him as well. But in a way, he already had.

"Yes, my soul?" Came the prompt, the Dark Lord reading him like an open book.

"I was thinking these past few weeks while in Bern… when I'll be ready, when we return back home and I kill him. You should make another horcrux as well." Harry nibbled at Voldemort's already parted lips before he resumed speaking his mind. "Quite a few are already destroyed and I miss… I guess I miss that part of you inside me, so hurry up and put it back."

What shame? What rationality? There was only this handsome man keeping Harry close, looking at him as if he could not believe Harry were real. Even after all this time. Their mouths met and parted, and met again. Cold water now a little above their ankles; soaking socks, trousers, and skin.

“Yes, whatever you wish for,” the Dark Lord promised, twirling Harry around like a child whose giggle was followed by another. “You’d be my soul and I’d be yours once again. We’ll conquer what is left to be conquered, we’ll live and keep living, just us. Just us.”

Harry laughed with all his might, seeking Voldemort’s arms and their safety. “Yes, Tom,” he sighed into the man’s neck, lips tracing over an unsteady pulse. “Just us, just us two.”

The sun was not shining but the future was bright.

The end

Chapter End Notes

It's done!!! And here you have the actual proof I'm a sucker for happy endings when it comes to Voldemort and Harry ┐(￣▽￣)┌ Anyway, thank you for all the support, for reading, for the kudos and especially for the comments. It means more than you can image.

Hope I didn't disappoint too much, dears:)

End Notes

Written for tomarry secret santa 2016, gift for arrowgays

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